Dealing with the Demon

...and nine other short stories

Holly Jahangiri

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Dealing with the Demon

Some days the dragon wins, thought Kaleigh as the horrible creature contemptuously swatted Alia's decaying corpse with its massive, scaly tail. The enchanted quartz amulet around Alia's neck pulsed faintly, relaying its belated distress signal across the land. Kaleigh watched helplessly as the red dragon raised one heavy, clawed foot above Alia's head and brought it down in a ruthless, crushing blow that shattered and silenced the amulet once and for all. Kaleigh winced reflexively, but realized that the young mage was mercifully well beyond pain's reach.

Dusk crept through the forest, and the dragon grew bored. It clawed idly at Alia's broken body, then kicked it aside as it thundered out of the clearing and through the forest in search of livelier prey. Still Kaleigh kept her watchful, silent vigil over Alia. Though powerless to help the golden-haired mage, Kaleigh was nevertheless reluctant to abandon her mangled body to further desecration.

"Ho there! What's this?" cried a small voice from the dark edge of the forest. Kaleigh looked up, startled. With Alia dead, she was mute; she could not even make the stranger aware of her presence. She knotted her fists in frustration.

'Help her!' thought Kaleigh, hoping the urgency of her telepathic message might cross the barriers, which rendered her so useless to her beloved Alia. The impish creature bounded from the dripping, dark bushes and glanced around furtively before raiding the dead mage's pockets. His pointed ears wriggled gleefully beneath a tangle of unkempt, sandstone and chalk colored hair. He filled his own pockets with Alia's coins, and then hefted her great-sword from her side. The sheer weight of it caused him to topple over her body, face-first into a plocket of warm dragon dung.

"Bah!" he screamed, scrambling to his feet. He spat several times and rubbed his prune-like face vigorously against his shirtsleeve. Kaleigh giggled in spite of herself. The little imp kicked the great-sword and bent to snatch up Alia's golden wand. He shook it

vigorously. When nothing came of that, he began a little dance of thrust and parry, using the wand as a fencing foil. His movements, for all they lacked in grace or skill, were theatrical. His features became animated as he battled his imaginary demons. He whirled about suddenly, swinging the wand up and over in a great, sweeping arc. The mischievous imp was totally unprepared for the stunning blast of heat and light as the wand misfired, singing his hair and his tattered, threadbare clothing. With a terrified yelp, he threw the wand into the bushes and scampered back into the darkened forest.

Kaleigh sighed with dismay and frustration. Alia's corpse was growing — ripe. Time was running out. Without Alia, Kaleigh would lose her last link with this world. She could inhabit another body, as she had done so many times in the past, but this one felt right — Alia was so much a part of her now that Kaleigh had no wish to re-establish that connection anew. The two were bonded-separated by time and space, yet sharing the same thoughts and concerns as deeply as if they were twins. Kaleigh looked at her watch. Only 30 seconds left until their lives would be irrevocably separated.

Kaleigh felt a wave of dread and despair as her fingers touched the keyboard. There was still one option left to her, dreadful as it was. She hesitated only a moment before typing the chilling command, NETHERWORLD. She swallowed hard, and pressed the ENTER key.

Instantly, her screen flashed with light and another being appeared beside Alia. He was tall and breathtakingly handsome. Kaleigh gasped as her fingers moved involuntarily towards the screen. As they made contact, a slight shiver ran down her spine. The stranger turned to face her, as if he could see straight through the screen, as if he were actually aware of her presence. "Seems you expect an awful lot of the Darkside," chuckled the demon, gesturing towards Alia.

"Who, me?" typed Kaleigh.

"Well, it certainly wasn't that unfortunate heap of mangled flesh and bones who summoned me," he replied. His smile was unnerving.

Kaleigh felt strangely lightheaded, as if none of this were real. "So, my dear, are you prepared to pay the price?"

"Yes," whispered Kaleigh as she typed her response and pressed the ENTER key. After all, it was only a game.

The demon knelt over Alia and laid his hands upon her torn and bloodied flesh. The effect was instantaneous and terrifying. Her body convulsed and went rigid, as if struck by a deadly electrical current. Then, just as suddenly, Alia fell limp and her eyelids fluttered open. Still bleeding profusely and badly disoriented by recent death and shock, she was unable to move or speak, but she was blessedly alive!

Kaleigh glanced at her watch in disbelief. Impossible, she thought. She flipped through the dog-eared "Player's Handbook" to the section on "Death and Resurrection." The Handbook clearly stated that there was no way to resurrect a character that had been dead for more than seven minutes. Alia had been dead for a full eight, maybe nine, minutes when the stranger touched her, jolting her unceremoniously back to life. There was no documentation on the NETHERWORLD command, but Kaleigh could not imagine why the game designers would have implemented such an easy way to circumvent the normal death penalties of the game.

"Better get her to a healer," warned the handsome demon. "She could still die, but I charge the same in any case."

Kaleigh started to ask what the demon's price was but, as soon as his words were spoken, he vanished in a puff of gray smoke. Through strength of will and a series of hastily typed commands, Kaleigh guided Alia's painful progress through the dark, misty wilds of Erlandia, keeping close to the worn paths hewn by hunters and adventure-seeking rogues. The young mage was barely conscious, and with each step her wounds bled anew. Pale, but determined, she struggled bravely to the outskirts of Dirk's Landing. There she fell, babbling deliriously, into the arms of a half-drunken sailor, named Keltain, who chivalrously, if a bit roughly, carted her over his shoulder to an aged, myopic healer he knew in town.

With Alia safe at last, Kaleigh logged off for the night. It was only a game, but the vicarious experience had pumped a rush of adrenalin through her veins nonetheless, and the ensuing relief of Alia's timely rescue had left her drained.

As she logged off, Kaleigh received a notice from The System that she had EMAIL waiting for her. She entered the command "READ" and The System promptly displayed the letter that awaited her.

> Dear StormRiders Player,
>
> Our records indicate that at 21:09 this evening, you invoked the new NETHERWORLD feature. We are pleased to be able to offer our customers such innovative and advanced technology, and we are always striving to further enhance your gaming experience. We value your opinion, and look forward to hearing your reaction to the NETHERWORLD feature. As with any new feature of this complexity, occasional bugs are to be expected. We appreciate your patience, and hope that you continue to find StormRiders an enjoyable game.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> J.PETERS, National Marketing Manager
>
> The System

Too tired to reply, Kaleigh saved the message to disk with a reminder to send a note of thanks to The System for their diligent efforts to improve and enhance their games. With a wry grin, Kaleigh thought that her only complaint was that these games were, in fact, too good and too addictive. They played hell on her credit card, but then, what good was money if you couldn't spend it?

As she typed in the logoff sequence, The System displayed its usual message:

> Goodnight, Kaleigh. Have a great day tomorrow! Adventure with us again soon!

It really was remarkable the way The System kept track of each user's personal preferences, tailoring its logon and logoff messages to each. Kaleigh flipped the switch on her computer, and headed up the stairs to bed.

Almost as soon as her head touched the pillow, Kaleigh drifted off to an uneasy sleep. Exhausted as she was, she tossed and turned, winding the covers around her legs and curling into a semi-fetal position. Her mind raced with an overload of real-life and imagined images superimposing themselves on one another in a surreal, nightmarish mish-mash. At one point, Alia stood before her, pale and trembling, a look of deep sorrow on her ashen face. Kaleigh took a step toward her, but she backed away, shaking her head in negation and denial. Alia was as mute and powerless in Kaleigh's dreams as Kaleigh was in Erlandia. Kaleigh reached out with both hands, and the image dissolved. She awoke drenched in cold sweat and sobbing with despair.

When at last the first light of dawn flickered through the window, touching Kaleigh's cheek, she arose from her bed unrested and restless. She gasped at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Deep purple half-moons under her eyes made her skin look sallow and unhealthy. Her hair was sweat-damp and tangled. Kaleigh splashed cold water on her face and rubbed it vigorously with a soft towel before going downstairs to start a reviving pot of coffee.

While the coffee brewed, Kaleigh went out to fetch the morning paper. She opened the door and screamed, then immediately felt foolish. The six-foot brute who towered over her was only the phone man, she could tell that immediately from his uniform and the blue and white van parked on the street behind him.

"I'm sorry I startled you, ma'am, but there's been a report of some trouble on your line, and we wanted to let you know we'd be working on it. Had you noticed anything?"

"No, nothing," said Kaleigh, having largely recovered her composure and managing a rather sheepish smile. "As you can see, I just got up, so I haven't been on the phone at all today. It was fine last

night-“ Kaleigh stopped, thinking she might be babbling irrelevant information that would only delay any necessary repairs.

“All right, ma’am, we’ll look into it and see if we can’t get you fixed up. Mind if I check your phones in here?”

“Uh, no, go right ahead. Can I get you a cup of coffee?”

“No ma’am, but thank you anyway.” Kaleigh pointed out the white Trimline on the oak table by her Laz-E-Boy. The repairman lifted the receiver and listened. He lowered it, punched in a few numbers, and lifted it to his ear again. His expression was one of utter bafflement. “Do you have another phone line, ma’am?”

“Yes, in the office. Why?”

“Well, nothing wrong with this line, that I can see. Show me the phone for the other line, and I’ll check it out.” Kaleigh gestured towards the office and led the man in.

“Over there, on the desk.”

The repairman checked the phone and nodded. “Yup, that’s the one. You say it was working last night?”

“That’s right. That’s the one I use for my computer. It was working until around 9:30 last night — after that, I don’t know.”

“Okay, well, I’m going to go out and check your line, and I’ll need to check the phone one more time before I go. Will you be home for about the next 20 minutes?”

Kaleigh nodded and saw the man out. She picked up the newspaper and poured herself a steaming mug of fresh coffee. Temporarily between jobs, she grabbed a red pen, pulled the Classified section of the paper, and began pouring over the “Help Wanted” ads. The few freelance writing assignments she picked up each month paid the bills, but left precious little to support her computer gaming habit. She had just circled the third promising ad when the doorbell rang. It was the telephone repairman, and his expression was grim. What he held in his hand was grimmer.

"This yours?"

"Oh, God," gasped Kaleigh, her lip quivering. "What the —" The sight of her little mama cat, rigid as a board, eyes wild but lifeless, and quite certainly dead, was a blow to the gut.

"Chomped down on the line — I don't understand it, those lines should've been well-encased, but there they were, and the poor little cat just took it into her head to chew 'em up. On the bright side, your phone's fixed." The man grimaced; clearly he hadn't meant that to come out the way it did.

Kaleigh nodded in understanding. "Thank you." She took the lifeless cat from him and stood there holding it as the man headed back out to the van.

Kaleigh seldom cried these days, and even if she'd been inclined, was too stunned to cry for the little tiger-striped mama cat. Poor little Jolie had been Kaleigh's companion and sometimes nemesis for almost half her life. Always the independent little predator, full of spirit, Jolie usually reserved her teeth for squirrels and birds and Kaleigh's ankles. Kaleigh wondered with a sense of futility what had possessed her to attack the electrical line.

She laid the swollen, rigid little body on the front porch, in the shade, and went back to the house to dig up a box that might serve as a makeshift coffin. Finally she located a cardboard shipping box with sturdy sides. It would be a snug fit, but that didn't seem to matter now. Kaleigh dug up the soft earth and buried the little cat in the garden, under the Calla lilies.

Kaleigh stood and wiped the tears from her face with the back of her mud-stained hand. She wanted-needed-to go there now, to Erlandia, to be where she was in control. It was an addiction to her, an escape, and in her aloneness she craved it even more than usual.

The computer whirred to life as Kaleigh flipped the on/off switch at the back of the CPU. She'd set her computer to log on to The System immediately upon startup, so within minutes the screen

flashed the familiar "welcome" messages. Option 8 sent her directly to Games of the Universe, home of StormRiders.

Moments later, Kaleigh was standing in a shadowy corner of the healer's abode. The old man was brewing something noxious in the fire, and she felt herself choking on the smoke. Alia, resting fitfully on the narrow, horsehair cot, sat up and screamed.

"Ah, good, ye've come back to us!" cackled the aged healer. "Thought we'd lost ye for a time there."

Kaleigh typed, blending into Alia's being with a smooth, almost imperceptible shift of consciousness. "Lost me?" She blinked.

"Took ye fer a goner, that's the truth."

"Oh, the dragon —"

"From the looks of ye, I'd say there was more to yer adventures than some mangy dragon." The old healer raised an eyebrow at Alia and went on about his business, adding a sprinkle of herbs to the pot now and then, and stirring the horrid mess with a big iron ladle.

"Am I fit to go, sir?" inquired Alia.

"As fit as ye'll be fer some time to come, lass. Ye need rest, and more 'n that. But it's yer mind needs tendin' now, and that's not me area of expertise. Ye've seen things, terrible things, and talked of 'em in the night. Best I can do is give ye a bit of dreamroot, to help ye sleep."

"I thank you," Alia replied, taking the vial of dreamroot potion from the wizened old man. She reached into her pockets for silver to pay him, and stopped short, a look of horror and embarrassment on her reddened face. "I…"

"Taken care of," said the healer, dismissing her abruptly.

A dark shadow seemed to pass over him as he said it;

Kaleigh knew that the demon must have paid for Alia's care, as well. "Now, if yer feelin' fit enough to go, then go. I have work to do."

Alia thanked him again and found her way to the door. Kaleigh was in the mood to fight dragons, but she knew it would be foolhardy to send Alia out in the wilds again so soon, in her weakened condition. She and Alia wandered the streets of Dirk's Landing in search of something to alleviate the empty ache and boredom they both felt, each in her own way.

As Alia wandered aimlessly around Dirk's Landing, Kaleigh grew increasingly restless. He mind wasn't on the game, and the game wasn't providing its usual brand of escapist therapy. There were only 6 other people in the game, anyway. She directed Alia to the temple and logged out.

Kaleigh stood up and stretched. Her mind was wandering. She stepped out into the blinding sunshine to check the mail and cringed at the sight of her BankCentral card bill. If she didn't get a job soon, she'd be forced to choose between starvation and painful System withdrawal. Tomorrow, Kaleigh promised herself, I'll send out some resumes. Kaleigh stuffed the bill into her pocket and went back to the computer.

The System welcomed her by name, as it always did. She sipped her coffee and pressed "8" to access Games of the Universe. The StormRiders banner scrolled quickly by, and in a moment, she was transformed into Alia, still wandering the streets of Dirk's Landing as if time had stood still. There were eight other players in the game, and she guided Alia through the alleys and back streets in search of a familiar face.

Alia shivered as she turned the corner onto Hazelwood Street. She had carelessly ventured into one of the nastier sections of the Landing. Standing in the shadows of an abandoned tenement, she lost all sense of direction and longed to find her way back to the marketplace. As she glanced back, she thought she saw stealthy movement in one of the darkened doorways just behind her. Kaleigh did a quick inventory check and remembered, to her dismay, that Alia had lost all of her weapons to the dragon. Even the clothes on her back had been provided by the kindly old healer.

Alia dreaded risking a spell in the Landing; it tended to draw the unwelcome attention of the Zandorian Order. Their members held the strange and fanatical conviction that magic was of the Unlife, and evil of the vilest sort. She had learned to pass among them, relying on her wits and her skill with the unenchanted blade, but she was cautious. One slip could be deadly, and the Zandorians had an uncanny degree of perception when it came to sniffing out the hapless mage or sorcerer who dared ward himself with even the subtlest of protection spells. One offensive spell, and they'd be on her like flies on dragon dung.

Alia ducked into a nearby doorway and waited, listening. Her heart raced. The silence of the back streets was deafening. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to think. Surely the reality could be no worse than the terrors Alia's mind conjured for her amusement. She dared a glance toward the deserted street. A low, male voice chuckled softly from the shadows, mocking her.

"Who's there?" she cried.

"Who wants to know?" retorted the voice, frighteningly close.

Alia swallowed hard and stepped into the open alley. "My name is Alia. Why do you follow me?"

"Follow you? Why should I waste my time following a penniless mage who hasn't even got a sharpened stone with which to defend herself?" Again his tone was mocking, but not unkind. She heard footsteps and whirled to face a man three hands taller than herself, but slender — his movements so quick and agile that he might be part shadow as he slipped through crowds unnoticed and crept with stealthy silence down cobble stoned streets. "Shadowspawn, m'lady," he said, bowing slightly even as he gave her an insolent wink of his eye. "At your service."

Alia's eyes narrowed as she considered this handsome rogue who so carelessly offered himself to her. 'Why?' she wanted to ask, but held her tongue and searched his face for clues instead.

"I'm bored," he replied, as if reading her thoughts. How unnerving, she thought, as he smiled and yawned elaborately.

"Why not?" mumbled Alia. This stranger was trouble, she knew that as instinctively as she knew the bright orb of Ara would rise in the sky each morning, and dip below the waters each night. Shadowspawn grinned. It had never occurred to him that she might not be as desperate for adventure as he, or that she would not find his company charming. She held out her hand, and quickened her pace to match his as he wove through the maze of tiny streets that led to the Wharf.

Shadowspawn bought bread and cheese and mead, a sharp dagger for Alia and a wicked-looking hunting knife for himself. He haggled over the price of a pack and sturdy boots, and while the shopkeeper was thusly distracted, Alia tucked some of the old man's costly healing herbs into the deep pockets of her cloak. Shadowspawn winked at her, and she blushed. She had never stolen in her life, but with no money and an insatiable hunger for adventure, she had been forced to agree that Shadowspawn's plan was best.

Shadowspawn lifted a few gold coins from the pockets of a portly, foul-smelling merchant who brushed haughtily past him in the bazaar. With that, he booked passage for two on the Black Swan, a sleek little cutter that was about to set off for the far side of the Caerlandyl Bay. As the sails billowed and the wooden boat sliced cleanly through the murky water, Alia turned her face to the wind and watched the shoreline grow distant.

Kaleigh wondered about the player behind the character, Shadowspawn. Probably some geeky computer operator working the night shift, playing StormRiders by day. She laughed aloud at the mental image of him in horn-rimmed glasses, starched white shirt, and pocket protector. As Alia leaned dreamily against Shadowspawn, Kaleigh chuckled and went out to the kitchen to refill her coffee mug. The inside of the mug was thick with old coffee. Days old. Kaleigh dropped it into the sink, where it shattered. She had just been drinking from that mug, hadn't she? She cleaned up the broken ceramic shards

and made a fresh pot of coffee. By the time she got back, Shadowspawn was pacing the deck like a nervous cat.

"Now that wasn't so hard, was it?" Shadowspawn winked at Alia. For a moment, Kaleigh wondered how he could possibly know what she'd been doing. Then she understood. He was referring to her heist of the herbs back in the bazaar. "Might make a thief out of you yet, little Mage." He laughed wickedly and left Alia at the rail. "Quick tour of the hold before we dock," he whispered. He dropped out of sight like a shadow at high noon. Alia prayed he wouldn't get caught — she shuddered at the thought of the burly captain and his crew stringing a handsome thief and his foolish accomplice up on the mast, or dragging them on a line behind the boat for shark bait.

The cutter docked at an aging pier on the eastern edge of Caerlandyl Bay. Shadowspawn dragged Alia over to the gangplank and hustled her off the boat, eager to be far from the docks when the crew discovered their missing cargo. "Just a few gold coins and lightweight trinkets," he whispered. "Thought you might like this." The thief held out a softly pulsing quartz amulet.

Alia gasped. She knew full well the real worth of an enchanted thought-amulet, and she hesitated as she reached out for it. She did not want to be indebted to the roguish stranger, but without her amulet, she had been less than whole. Her own telepathic abilities were strong, but not strong enough to control the almost constant buzz of thoughts that coursed like static through her mind. The amulet channeled the thoughts for her, separating them into image strands like clear rivers in bright sunlight. Alia's hunger for it finally overcame her misgivings, and she nodded. "Please," she whispered, her voice hoarse with need.

As Shadowspawn hung the amulet gently around Alia's slender throat, his fingers brushed her pale skin and their eyes met. Alia shuddered as she felt herself being drawn into the whirling darkness that lay beneath the gleaming surface of his eyes. Kaleigh shook her head and took another swig of coffee. It was cold. 'How could it be cold already?' she thought, peering into the mug. She made a face as

she pushed it across the desk, out of easy reach. 'Why do I let myself get caught up in these fantasies?' she wondered, even as she typed the commands to join Alia to Shadowspawn so that she could keep up with him as he darted between the stalls of the Kythilos bazaar and put some healthy distance between them and the crew of the Black Swan.

They paused to rest in the doorway of a ramshackle waterfront inn. The sign over the heavy wooden door read, "Molly Marin's" and there was a gaudy, painted carving of a buxom maid protruding from the side of the stone building. Alia blushed at the sight of it, and Shadowspawn seemed intrigued. "Why not?" he asked as she shook her head. She was young, but she was familiar enough with the back streets of Dirk's Landing. She knew a brothel when she saw it. "Come on," whispered the other player to Kaleigh, through their characters. "I need to log, and this is as good a place as any."

Kaleigh glanced at her watch. Alia nodded reluctantly. The proprietor undressed Alia with his eyes as they entered, and gave Shadowspawn an approving smirk. "Twenty silvers a night," he announced wickedly, watching the rose flush rise on Alia's cheeks. "Forty if ye want two rooms."

"One's fine," snapped Alia, reaching for the key.

Shadowspawn chuckled, his eyes registering mild surprise.

"What a wench you are!" he teased when they got to their room.

"Not at all," she replied, glaring hostilely. "But little as I trust you, I trust these sailors and cutthroats out there less."

"Are you saying that I'm to be your bodyguard, m'lady?" asked Shadowspawn, his eyes dancing with mockery in the firelight. "I trust you'd not ask me to guard goods I'd not had a chance to inspect-"

Alia grabbed a poker from the hearth and swung it around, cutting him off abruptly as it made contact with his backside. Kaleigh angrily punched the keys to log off, leaving Shadowspawn alone in a musty, waterfront brothel of Molly Marin's.

Kaleigh lit a cigarette and stood up. Her whole body ached and her eyes were dry from staring at the screen. She glanced at the clock and cursed. It slowly dawned on her that she hadn't eaten all day, and the coffee was starting to gnaw at her insides. She opened the refrigerator and gagged. Nothing there but a bit of moldy cheese and some spoiled tuna salad. Hadn't she just gone to the grocery store two days ago? Kaleigh ground her cigarette out in the ashtray. She tried to recall the details of the trip, and it irritated her that she couldn't remember exactly when she'd gone or what she'd bought there. She slammed the door to the fridge and opened the cupboards. The rye bread was stale and stiff, but there were still two cans of Spam and a can of Campbell's Chicken Noodle Soup up there, along with some oriental rice crackers.

Grimacing, Kaleigh slammed the cupboard doors shut and went to the phone. She lit another cigarette while she waited for the friendly and all-too-familiar voice on the other end of the line. "Little O's All-Night Pizza Emporium, may I have your phone number?"

"555-9634." She suddenly had a brilliant idea: twenty-four hour pizza delivery, straight from the computer. She almost laughed out loud. Why, with an online pizza parlor, users with only one phone line might never have to log off.

The girl verified Kaleigh's address and practically sang the Little O's standard opening line. "Would you like pizza, pasta, or chicken tonight, Miss Harris?"

"Pizza." What else? In the ten months she'd been calling Little O's, she'd never bothered to sample their other menu items, despite various enticing sales pitches, and Kaleigh wondered why they still bothered to ask. "Medium," she added quickly, cutting the girl off before she could push their new, four-pound, fully loaded "Daddy-O."

"That'll be $16.98. If it's not there in 45 minutes, you'll receive $4 off your next order. Thank you, and have a good evening!" There was a soft click and Kaleigh hung up. She drew deeply on her cigarette, watching the tip flare in the growing darkness.

The pizza guy rang her doorbell at 7:04, just two minutes short of the 45-minute deadline. His lips curled triumphantly as Kaleigh wrote out a check for $16.98 — it was a little game they'd been playing for some three months now, ever since he got assigned to her route. Kaleigh was certain he parked at the end of the street, waiting in the darkness to see just how close he could come to the exact time, taking a perverse pleasure in ringing the bell just seconds before he owed her $4 off. He'd missed once or twice, and the look on his face as he handed over the coupon was chilling. Last time he'd dropped it on the porch step and Kaleigh had had to stoop down to pick it up. She could hear him laughing as he strode to his car and raced off. This time, she just smiled sweetly and tossed a dollar's worth of pennies onto the stoop before slamming the door shut in his face. Turnabout, after all, was fair play.

She carried the pizza into the office and logged back onto The System. Shadowspawn would've left by now, and Alia could be far, far away before he returned. At least that was the plan.

Even before Alia opened her eyes in the grimy waterfront room she was aware of his presence. The reek of rum and male flesh pressed down upon her senses, and she leapt off the bed, reaching for her dagger. A sulfurous, yellow fog filled one corner of the room, and Alia's skin began to crawl as she saw the evil red eyes of a hellish monster as it vanished into the darkness. Shadowspawn caught her wrist before she could unsheathe her weapon and she cried out in shock and pain. As his hand closed around her wrist she knew that the icy touch was not his, but that of a demon. For one brief moment she imagined that she saw regret in his eyes, but then it was no longer his eyes that bore into hers so intensely. As he threw her back on the bed, Alia screamed.

Kaleigh didn't have time to reason with the rogue player. She wasn't about to be a pawn in whatever little scenario he had in mind, and she new he could easily overpower Alia. She could log out again, but she was getting a little tired of running, and she felt a strange surge of adrenalin and rage rush through her veins. "Blast you to hell,

whoever you are," she muttered. Her fingers flew across the keyboard as she typed "NETHERWORLD" and hit the ENTER key. She had hesitated the first time; this time, she didn't even flinch.

Alia stepped obediently through the mists and found herself in a place she would never have dreamed might exist in StormRiders. Vivid tapestries in rich, dark hues gave warmth to the massive, stone walls on which they were hung. A fire roared within the elaborately carved hearth at one end of the chamber, causing the shadows to dance in a wild, eerie frenzy. A man's deep, hypnotic voice whispered, "Do not be afraid. Make yourself at home." The voice was familiar — wasn't this the handsome demon who had rescued Alia from death by dragon? And yet, as the shivers coursed uncontrollably up her spine, Alia was very much afraid. There were no exits.

Alia was in no mood to explore, but Kaleigh looked at and touched every object she could find. The tapestries, upon closer inspection, were horrifying, yet nonetheless beautiful for the gruesome images they depicted. As she laid her hands on the exquisite fabric, Alia felt herself being sucked into the image. Acrid smoke made her lungs tighten convulsively. Her eyes watered until she could see nothing, and searing flames licked at her flesh until the pain became unbearable. She screamed as her mind tried to block it all, and her knees cracked as she fell to the stone floor. Kaleigh had pulled her away in time, but she clung to the stones, weeping. A quick health check revealed that she was down two lifeforce points and her strength was at a low ebb. Her alignment had shifted from good to neutral. "Nasty bit of programming, that," muttered Kaleigh. "'Make yourself at home,' indeed."

She glanced around the room. The ornately carved mantle over the fire held a jumble of intriguing artifacts and Kaleigh urged Alia reluctantly toward them. As she stood on tiptoe to gain a closer look, Alia blushed a deep crimson. The first object was the ivory figure of a woman, her naked skin gleaming bone white as she lay back across a pedestal of jagged obsidian rock. The legs sprawled lewdly at an impossible angle, and the long, delicate fingers of one pale hand

trailed across the space between them. A jade dragon watched over the woman, its fiery, opal eyes burning with something akin to lust. Even as Alia drew back, repulsed, Kaleigh felt a curious tingle of excitement.

"So, again you are willing to pay the price?" Kaleigh startled at touch of the man's hand on her shoulder. She turned to find herself staring into eyes like glowing coals, eyes as dark and deep as hell itself. His touch electrified and thrilled her in ways she would have preferred to experience with a flesh-and-blood lover.

"Who are you?" Kaleigh gasped. The demon smiled as he swept her into his arms and crushed her mouth with his own, claiming her utterly. Out of the corner of her eye, Kaleigh watched Alia fade, wraithlike, as she backed into the tapestry and vanished. The little mage slipped into the threads and became one with them. Alia, woven in shades of gold and silver, her eyes sadly accusing — Alia, holding a small, striped cat in her arms. Suddenly, Kaleigh understood the intricate weave of the tapestry, and it was too late. Frantically, she wrenched herself free of the demon and whirled, searching for an exit. "Exit! Logoff!" she screamed. "Quit!" She backed away from the demon, panting.

The demon laughed as he responded with one of The System's characteristically smart-ass remarks: "Sorry, I don't understand what you mean. Please re-phrase your command." Kaleigh's knees collapsed. The demon caught her before she hit the black and gold marble tile, before the world turned to black.

* * *

Third Place Winner

Third Annual DistantWorlds

Short Story Competition

2001

http://www.distantworlds.com

Just a Little Peace and Quiet

"Dammit! I don't have anything to wear!" A pair of hand-tinted Christina Velati jeans flew over the railing and hit the floor in a crumpled heap. Angie yanked open her dresser drawer and threw it on the floor.

Charlotte cringed at the drawer's high-pitched, grating squeal of protest—just before the loud thump overhead shook the ceiling light fixtures. "Angie, just find something to put on and let's go! You'll be late for school!"

"I don't care. I'm not going. I have nothing to wear." Angie stood in the doorway wearing nothing but a flimsy, nylon kimono to which she'd helped herself from her mother's closet. The sullen teen threw herself melodramatically across Charlotte's bed and sighed.

"You are going. Now get dressed. You have a closet full of clean clothes; go find some and put them on. Now. You have five minutes." Charlotte bit her lower lip hard to rein in her temper. This little scene was merely another encore in a year-long run of bad performances by her daughter. Charlotte massaged the back of her neck and pressed her fingertips to her temples. "Christ," she muttered, half curse, half prayer.

"Fine. Why don't I just go in this?" Angie stood in front of her mother, feet planted defiantly apart, hands on her hips, and let the kimono fall open to reveal last summer's barely-faded tan lines.

"Why don't you, Ange?" Charlotte shrugged and grabbed her car keys. Angie would not have the satisfaction of shocking her mother or hearing one smidgeon of outrage or indignation in her voice. "If that's the look you want to be remembered for in the yearbook, let's go."

"God, you are such a bitch. Mother." Angie practically spat the word "mother" and added to it under her breath. She snatched up the discarded jeans and tugged them on, hopping first on one foot, then the other, as she struggled to pull them over her hips. Charlotte noticed that her daughter hadn't bothered with underwear, but she

said nothing. She just closed her eyes and counted slowly to ten. When she opened them again, Angie was dressed. The girl's eyes were like smoldering coals burning into her mother's heart, searing her at the very core of her being. This child she had loved so completely, so unconditionally, so fiercely from birth now seemed, more often than not, her bitterest enemy. Charlotte craved a respite from the neverending war their relationship had become. She felt sure that Angie craved it just as desperately, but neither of them knew how to bring about a truce.

The two of them rode in silence to the high school. Angie got out of the car as quickly as she could, slamming the door hard on her way out, just for good measure. Charlotte burned rubber in the school parking lot; it had been hard to hold the anger in check, and she felt an immature need to make a statement.

Angie looked over her shoulder and rolled her eyes, then linked arms with a lanky, sloe-eyed boy and headed to class. "She's insane," the girl confided in her friend.

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Charlotte had an idea. It seemed a brilliant idea, but she knew that she could never share it with another living soul. She drove to the hardware store, smiling to herself as she tuned the car radio to the Oldies station and started to hum along with the Beach Boys.

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After several productive hours spent in the dim light of the old cellar, Charlotte emerged in the kitchen covered in sweat and light gray powder. She had never imagined she had any talent for remodeling, beyond choosing trendy wallpapers and countertops for others to install. She definitely had a talent for spending Peter's money, but for the first time in her life, she had built something substantial with her own two hands. Thinking back on the transformation she'd wrought in the cellar, Charlotte grinned with pride. She would have to finish the job later, of course, but the hardest part was done.

The thought of ending a life brought her nothing but a sense of peace.

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"Hi, honey, I'm home!" Peter's voice carried up the stairs, clear as a bell. "Charlotte? Angie?"

"Up here," called Charlotte, straightening up from what felt like a permanent crouch after spending the last thirty minutes cleaning junk out of the hall closet. Charlotte massaged her lower back, kneading tension knots with her fingers as she flexed her spine. Aches and pains in muscles and joints Charlotte didn't know existed were the fruits of her day's labor.

Peter met her at the top of the stairs and gave her a perfunctory little peck on the lips. "I invited Joe Johnson and his wife over for dinner tomorrow night – you don't mind, do you, Char?" Peter surveyed the mess on the landing - the unsorted odds and ends that spilled out of the closet and defied explanation as to how they fit in there in the first place.

"Oh, no, of course not," snapped Charlotte sarcastically. She was hot, sweaty, and aggravated. The thought of entertaining the Johnsons tomorrow night on short notice was just icing on the cake. "Shall I cook a standing rib? Whip up a little crème brulée?"

"We could do burgers on the grill..."

"Oh, that's sure to impress your boss, Peter."

"I'll call and postpone." Disappointment was evident in his tone. "I'll tell them Angie's sick, or something. Where is Angie, anyway?"

"I don't know, Peter. Out. Wherever it is teenage girls go to defy their embarrassingly horrid mothers."

"Isn't it a little late for her to be out?" asked Peter. He was concerned for his daughter's safety, but something in Charlotte's voice set off alarms in the back of his mind.

Charlotte gave Peter a look guaranteed to wilt lettuce. Imitating her daughter's all-too-familiar, scornful expression, she rolled her eyes and said, "Duhhhh."

"I'll go look for her."

"You do that."

Peter frowned, started to say something, then shut his mouth quickly as he thought better of it. He hurried downstairs, grabbed his keys, and went to comb the neighborhood for Angie.

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Charlotte stepped back and gave a small nod of satisfaction, pleased with the work she had done. The stones fit together perfectly. The mortar was smooth and even; it dried quickly, and the wall was good and solid.

It would take Peter a while to find the body; by then, Charlotte would be long gone. Charlotte smiled.

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One by one, Charlotte lit the fat candles she had brought with her. Their soft radiance cast dancing tongues of light and shadows upon the walls. The silence was so complete that Charlotte could hear the sputtering of the wax as it was sucked up the wick and drawn into the flame.

Charlotte opened a bottle of Satterfield Chardonnay. It was the bottle Peter had given her for Mother's Day. Feeling decadent, she swigged it straight from the bottle. There was no one around to care, or to be grossed out about the backwash. She cracked open the new Sharalyn Feltzer novel she'd been saving for—for what? Six months? Waiting for a quiet afternoon, when she could read for a few hours, uninterrupted?

Ahhh, thought Charlotte. This was better than a hot bubble bath. She stretched and turned, cradling the book comfortably on her forearm, losing herself in the story. There was no one to disturb her,

now. Charlotte read until her eyelids grew heavy. Her arms felt like they were made of lead, and she let sleep overtake her. The book fell to the floor with a heavy thud. Charlotte, who had never known an uneventful night's sleep, slept the dreamless sleep of exhaustion. A smile curled the corners of her lips. One by one, the candles hissed and died for lack of the oxygen needed to burn. Charlotte could not hear the voices on the other side; she could not hear the soft, fleshy fists pounding on the unyielding stone fortress that she had built around herself. She could not hear her daughter, who had been hanging out and smoking pot with friends – could not hear her apologize. Charlotte could not hear Peter's desperate attempts to smash through solid rock and well-made mortar. She would have told them, if she could, that her walls were built to last.

They Might Have Been Twins

They might have been twins. Jeannette and little Jen stood hand-in-hand under a bright sun that reflected off their golden hair to cast angelic haloes around their tiny, upturned faces. Emily crouched low and aimed, hoping to catch the expression of joy on her daughter's face. Little Jen looked up at the other girl in wonder, her blue eyes asking silently, "What's next? Where do we go from here?"

"Come on, Jeannette, the ice cream's melting!" Her father's laughing voice barely reached the child over the roar of the ocean waves, but his long arms flapping caught her attention and made her run, giggling, towards the brightly colored cabana.

"Ice cream, Little Jen! Run!"

Emily stood up and brushed sand off her legs. It was Jeannette's fifth birthday, and the family was celebrating with a seaside picnic. Emily shook her head and snapped another picture of the two girls running across the dunes, then tucked the camera into her pocket as she made her way, slowly, to the cabana. Richard handed her a dish of ice cream. Already, the two girls' faces were covered in sticky rivulets of French vanilla that dripped down their chins, onto their matching swimsuits.

"It isn't right, Richard."

"We've been through all this, Em," Richard whispered, flashing Emily a warning look. He grabbed her by the elbow and steered her away from the girls. "Not here, not now, okay? I thought we'd agreed. Look how happy she is! How can you say it's wrong, Em? Just look at her!"

"Them."

"Yes, yes, of course – look at them! They're happy together."

"I'm going for a walk," said Emily, brushing Richard's hand from her arm.

"Emily!" Richard's plaintive call was lost in the crashing of the waves on the rocks, drowned out by the rhythmic breathing of the Atlantic. A dolphin leapt into the air, its smooth flanks glistening in the sunlight. Emily sighed and hung her head. It would be all right, she told herself. After all, she was the only one who seemed to think otherwise.

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For a time, Jeannette and Little Jen were inseparable. "I finally have a little sister," Jeannette whispered. Little Jen smiled and slipped her bone-china delicate hand into Jeannette's warmer, fleshier fingers. "We shall be best friends, always," agreed Little Jen.

Jeannette curled, brushed, and slowly stroked Little Jen's hair. She helped Little Jen into a frilly pink party dress and carefully tied the broad, silk sash in a jaunty bow at the back. Jeannette had begun dressing Little Jen in the clothes that she, herself, had outgrown in the last month. From downstairs, in the kitchen perhaps, Emily's voice reached the girls. "Tea time!"

The girls sat down together at the nursery table for their "afternoon tea." Mr. Bear and Parrot Head occupied the two extra chairs, and the girls spoke to them as if they were honored guests, giggling behind chubby fingers at their imaginary replies.

"Ladies," Emily said with a small curtsey.

"Oh, Mama!" Jeannette giggled. Her ice blue eyes grew wide at the plate of sweets her mother offered. "Thank you very much," murmured Little Jen, smiling shyly.

Emily laid down the plate of warm, chocolate chip cookies, cinnamon-raisin scones, and sticky marzipan, then headed back to the kitchen. She turned to see the two girls sipping their lemonade "tea," golden heads bent close towards one another as they chattered endlessly about nothing.

A year ago, Emily had occupied the tiny chair where Little Jen now sat. It was Emily to whom Jeannette confided the latest scandals

of Mr. Bear and Parrot Head, and Emily with whom Jeannette shared the fantasies of childhood. Suddenly, Emily was overcome with a sharp pang of jealousy – a pain that faded just as quickly to a throbbing ache. The ache found a vague home in between the too-rapid beatings of her heart, and she turned away from the door.

Richard looked in on the girls and grinned. Little Jen was surely the perfect companion and confidante for his darling Jeannette. They were as compatible as chocolate and strawberries. This was a gift two years in the making, and he was rightfully pleased with himself. Few of the other fathers he knew would have thought so far ahead, planned the gift with such painstaking care, or spent such extravagant sums on a five-year-old daughter. But Jeannette, his only child, was Earth, and moon, and stars to him. She was the only daughter, the only child, he would ever have.

Richard accepted this simple fact, even though he himself had come from a large, raucous family of four boys and a multitude of cousins. He and Em had tried so hard, for so long. Em's pregnancy had not been an easy one, and the doctors advised them not to try again. Jeannette would be an only child. Emily had assured him that being an only child wasn't so bad, that she had never really missed the brothers and sisters she never had. Richard had nodded; the risks were too great, and he loved his Emily too much to lose her. Still, there was a crushing pain in his heart when Jeannette, about to turn three, had asked, "Daddy, why can't I have a sister?" Richard could not, would not, hurt his beloved Emily – but he would spare no effort or expense to bring a smile to their daughter's lovely face.

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Surfing the Internet some two years ago, while searching for something special for his soon-to-be-three Jeannette, Richard had stumbled across an ad for dolls. Not just ordinary dolls, but unique creations painstakingly crafted by a company called "Reflections in Perfection." Each doll was a meticulous replica of a cherished loved one, perfect in each tiny detail. Thanks to the miracles of modern biotech, each doll was imbued with a tiny fragment of the loved one's

DNA, ensuring not only a perfect likeness, but animation and personality as well. The doll's aging could be accelerated, to a point, and then the aging gene would be switched off, like a light bulb – the doll would remain at the age chosen by the buyer, forever.

Something at the back of Richard's conscience prickled, but intrigued, he read on. He ordered the company's annual report, and pored through the current articles – both for and against this latest, patented "cloning" process. At first, the public had been outraged by what was called "utterly tasteless marketing at best" and "a horrific, stomach-churning twist on the notion of 'playing God'" at worst. The company's owners had been vilified in the press as modern-day Hitlers, unethical Dr. Frankensteins exploiting loopholes in the hotly-debated and hard-won eugenics laws passed over recent decades. Nevertheless, Reflections in Perfection found plenty of buyers for their product. They could afford the tightest, most elegant security systems in the world.

Through researching and soul-searching the subject, Richard managed to satisfy himself that the dolls were not, in fact, clones. Tiny alterations and genetic mutations, in combination with a sufficient quantity of synthetic materials, guaranteed under the law that these dolls could not be declared "human" or granted the same rights as their human counterparts. Special "dermaphilic plastics," initially developed to advance the field of reconstructive surgery, were added to the genetic sequence. This tended to produce flawless, doll-like skin of extraordinary strength and pliability, so that it would not tear when a child played too roughly with the doll. Nerve fibers were altered to block most pain stimuli, although Reflections in Perfection recognized early on that dolls possessed of human personality and intelligence must also be subject to discipline, and carefully built that into the plans.

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Half a year passed. Emily pushed aside her misgivings, buried the hurt, and gradually warmed to Little Jen. She had to admit that her daughter's new plaything was delightful, on occasion. Where Jeannette

was boisterous, vivacious, and full of life, Little Jen was thoughtful, quiet, and contemplative – but always the doll was eager to join in games or mischief Jeannette devised for her entertainment. Both girls were bright and quick to learn. But as time went by, Jeannette grew bored with tea parties and princesses, endless hours of playing "school" or "house" or dressing up. By the time Jeannette was seven, she had grown disenchanted – bored - with Little Jen. More and more often, the doll was confined to the fancy leather-covered steamer trunk in which she had been delivered.

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And so it was that Emily came to be surprised by the sound of two girls chattering, laughing, and playing together one rainy afternoon. She listened quietly at the door, relieved in a way that the unusual doll, disturbing and intriguing as it was, was not forgotten or neglected by her daughter. And then she heard sounds that chilled her blood: a slap, a dull thud, Little Jen's high-pitched, piteous scream. Emily wrenched open the door and gasped, her face drained white with shock.

"Stop it, Jeannette! Stop!" Emily screamed at her daughter, horrified. Jeannette dropped the wooden spoon and turned to her mother with a puzzled expression.

"What is it, Mama? We were only playing."

Emily's breath came in ragged gasps; she stood in the doorway, panting, clutching at her sides. Her child had been beating Little Jen, mercilessly beating her, with the wooden spoon; the chillingly smooth skin on the doll's backside was swollen and red, and her frightened eyes filled with tears. "I was bad, Mama Em. Bad. Mama Jeannette says that she has to do this for my own good." The doll hiccupped, sobbing. "I want to be good, Mama Em, I want so much to be good, but I don't want to go back in the trunk! Oh, please, please…" The child's voice trailed off, choked back by her sobs.

Emily snatched up the wooden spoon and raised it over her daughter's back, poised to strike with every ounce of strength she could muster. "How could you?"

Jeannette flinched in fear and began to cry. "Mama, we were just playing!" the girl howled, cowering as she crawled out of Emily's reach.

Emily gasped; she felt as if an unseen fist had punched her in the stomach. She backed out of the room and took the spoon with her. "Never, Jeannette – never do that again," she whispered.

Jeannette nodded, tears streaming down her peach-soft cheeks. "It's just a doll, Mama," she whispered fearfully. "Just a doll."

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Little Jen was never beaten or thrown into the trunk again, after that day. Her face and hands grew dirty from neglect; her hair was unkempt and hopelessly knotted. For the most part, Jeannette ignored the doll.

Little Jen lay sprawling in a forgotten corner of the nursery. She knew better than to wander around the house alone; she knew that she was merely a doll to be used at the child's pleasure. How she knew that, she wasn't sure, but she dared not move.

There was an occasional thud from upstairs that Emily felt certain was Jeannette tossing the hapless doll against the nursery wall. Now and then, Emily would stop by the nursery while Jeannette was in school, and she would wipe the doll's face and hands with a warm washcloth, clean under its fingernails, brush its hair until it shone again with its unearthly light. "Why does she hate me so, Mama Em? Have I been very, very bad?" the doll would ask in a trembling voice that sounded so much like Jeannette's. "Are we not sisters? Best friends?" Emily shook her head sadly. "No, little one, you are not."

As time went by, Jeannette's interest turned to boys and fashion and hanging with her friends at the mall. The sound of a door

slamming became synonymous, in Emily's mind, with her teenaged daughter.

Richard didn't seem to notice these things. It was only right, only normal, that his precious Jeannette should outgrow the playthings of her youth. When Jeannette lifted her shirt to show him that she'd had bellybutton pierced, he merely shook his head and laughed. "What has become of you girls today?" he muttered, feigning the disapproval of one older and wiser.

Emily no longer felt revulsion when she looked at Little Jen, only an odd tenderness towards the doll, as if she were cradling her own Jeannette – a mere five years old, once again – in her arms. She held the doll tenderly, soothing away hurt feelings. Once or twice Little Jen reached up to brush the tears glistening on Emily's cheeks. "I am so sorry," Emily would whisper as she kissed the top of the doll's head. "So very, very sorry." Little Jen felt nothing but bewilderment and wonder at Mama Em's trembling shoulders, a thrill of fear at the woman's fierce embrace.

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For Jeannette's 16th birthday, Richard gave her a sporty red Camaro. Of course she drove too fast; Richard could hardly fault her for inheriting his lead foot. The bond between father and daughter grew deeper as Jeannette sped towards womanhood; the bond between Emily and Richard loosened and became a chasm wider than the Grand Canyon.

"Em, what's the matter with you?" demanded Richard. "You look at the girl as if you hate her. Your own daughter," he murmured, sadly.

"I don't hate her, Richard." Emily choked on the words, her voice hoarse. She wondered if that was a lie, because there was some deep and fearful truth in what Richard had said. As long as it went unspoken, Emily could deny it, even to herself. "I don't hate her," she whispered, eyes downcast.

⁂ ⁂ ⁂

Emily spent more and more time in the nursery, caring for the castoff doll, Little Jen. Innocent, forever and eternally innocent – that's what Little Jen was. She didn't have it in her to be mean-spirited or cruel, the way human children did. She was unable to lift a hand against Jeannette, or anyone for that matter. Her designers had seen to this, and had done their job well. And yet, she was not just "a stupid doll," as Jeannette so often referred to her. Her bright blue eyes shone with intelligence, and she was hungry for knowledge.

Emily and Little Jen had endless tea parties; they played princesses and games of "house" and "school." Little Jen particularly loved to play "school," for she loved to read. Forever five, she had nevertheless read Tolstoy and Hemingway, and tittered with guilty pleasure over the sordid tales of D.H. Lawrence. Her library grew by leaps and bounds, as did her appetite for books. She excelled in Algebra, and had a keen interest in science. Emily was delighted to teach her, yet sad that the doll would never be able to attend a real school.

Jeannette thought it was stupid and was embarrassed to bring her friends to the house, fearing they would catch her mother playing with the doll. "Why do you do that, Mama? You like that thing better than you like me. Why don't you just grow up?" cried Jeannette. The teenager grabbed her car keys from the hall table and stormed out the front door.

Richard dared not invite his colleagues home for dinner; Emily had recently taken to setting a place at the table for Little Jen. "Oh, God, Em, why?" he moaned. "That's not normal. It's just a doll, don't you see that?" He shook his head and made himself a second martini, with extra olives.

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The call came later that night. An accident on Ridge Road, a teenaged girl – "Yes, that's Jeannette, yes, I'm sure" – had taken the curve too fast and flown out into space over the canyon before plummeting to the rocks below in a fiery, heart-stopping crash.

"Yes, we think that she was drinking with friends before the accident, yes sir, we're so sorry for your loss. If you could just come by the morgue – yes, that will be fine, we'll see you then…" Richard let the phone fall as he choked back an anguished sob. He looked around the room frantically, searching for Emily, needing to share his grief. Then he heard their voices – hers and Little Jen's. He took the stairs to the nursery two at a time.

"What is it Papa Richard?" asked Little Jen, looking up at him from Emily's lap. Her was voice soft and timid.

"I am not your Papa!" Richard roared, tearing at his hair. He kicked at the doll; Little Jen went flying across the room. She lay against the wall, stunned and terrified. Emily flew at him in a rage, her nails raking his face, drawing blood.

"How dare you! Don't you lay a finger on that child, Richard!"

"Child?" he spat. "Child? Our child is dead, Em. That's not our child. Our child is – our child is…dead."

"No," Emily whispered. "No!" Richard reached for her, but Emily wrenched herself free of his grasp. Blind with grief and rage, she grabbed hold of the nearest solid object her hands encountered – Little Jen's trunk. She swung it wide; as Richard ducked, the trunk slammed against his skull with a dull crack. Stunned, he reached up to touch his head, and looked with amazement at the blood covering his fingers.

"Emily," he gasped. "Em, no!" Emily just stood there, watching, numb, as the blood poured from the gaping wound in her husband's head.

Little Jen, her blue eyes wide and frightened, reached for Emily's hand. Emily enfolded the tiny fingers in hers and pulled Little Jen close. "Poor baby, poor baby. I'm so sorry you had to see that…" Emily held her child to her breast – for Little Jen WAS her child, wasn't she? – and rocked her to sleep.

SHHH... DON'T YOU KNOW?

Roger coughed. It was a deep, phlegmy cough that burbled up from the bottom of his lungs and threatened to crack a rib. They'd thrown him in the Hole, again. Roger closed his eyes and savored the silence, the very thing the others feared most about the Hole. He inhaled deeply, though every breath was painful. Tasting the musty staleness of the air, Roger imagined that he was back in the stacks, tending the ancient library he loved, caressing the flecked leather bindings of the rare books he prized beyond all other things.

Roger never understood the small-mindedness of the academics who pretended to love his books, promised to care for them as he did (as if they could!), and tossed them aside when they had wrung the last drop of fine-print footnote usefulness from their worn, cracked, fragile pages. Roger snatched up the precious books, discarded upon sturdy oak study tables whose well-worn wood gleamed with the incessant polish of scholarly elbows.

Roger rubbed his hands. His long, pale fingers ached; they were not meant for hard labor in the biting cold of a rough wilderness. They were meant for turning pages, tracing words. Roger marveled at the roughness of calluses where only yesterday there were open sores. The joints of his ring and pinky fingers were stiff, impossible to straighten. But even so, here in the Hole, Roger was close to contented – as close as he had come in months, and certainly as close as he would ever come again. For there was a whole library in his mind, and he had only to close his eyes to see the great, stained-glass rosette window of that hallowed hall. As evening fell, the penumbral, multihued light of a dying sun cast its glance upon the dusty tomes that held the thoughts and dreams of men who understood the power of the written word and possessed the skill to bend it to their will. Roger felt a small, electric thrill course through his body at the thought of it. He was their acolyte, their paladin.

Roger frowned at a memory, fleeting, like a shadow on the moon. What was it that he felt, when he remembered the boy? The wild,

spirited, carefree boy who blew in through the front door on an Autumn wind, trailing leaves and the scent of apple cider in his wake? He rarely dwelt upon the injustice that brought him to this place. He accepted it, welcomed it, embraced it - even as the saints embraced their martyrdom. What was it that he felt now, frowning, brow creased with memory? Roger wasn't particularly troubled by guilt. Roger looked down at his hands. Blisters upon calluses; one cracked open, oozing blood and pus. He could see, through the gold-orange-red-blue kaleidoscope of light, that rosette window of his mind, how the boy had taken up a volume of Dante's poems, flipped through it with a dismissive flick of a moistened fingertip, then cast it aside as one would do with a dime-store romance novel or yesterday's Chronicle, unfit for wrapping fish bones. The boy had looked around, spotted the girl – the studious, respectful one with the mousy brown hair and glasses – and let out a loud "Whoop!" before pouncing upon her and her copy of The Politics of Aristotle. "Annemarie, Annemarie, the sun is shining, Annemarie! Why do you waste your precious life sitting in this li-brar-eeeeee!" The boy sang loudly and off-key. Annemarie flushed with embarrassment.

Roger was suddenly overcome with rage. His fingers clenched reflexively around the nearest object at hand, a gleaming silver letter-opener. Roger howled with pain and fury. He charged the boy, whose taunting smile turned to open-mouthed horror as he watched his own entrails burst forth from the red, gaping grin in his stomach to splat! Upon the cold, marble floor. "Shhhhhh!" Roger admonished, pulling the boy aside to make sure none of the loathsome mess fell upon the open book. "Don't you know you're in a library?"

Roger shook off the pall-of-death feeling that threatened to overcome him. No, indeed he had no regrets. But he did miss his books.

To Follow In Their Footsteps

"Vampires!" I threw down the Anne Rice book in disgust (I mean come on, who the hell believes in this stuff?) and rolled over to change the CD in my alarm clock to some weird indy thing my friend Jace gave me. The speakers were crap, but I couldn't afford a decent stereo system on what the parental units tried to pass off as an "allowance." I listened to some angry bitch screaming about PMS and how it was all her boyfriend's fault that she didn't have a freakin' life and how she wished he'd just up and die so she could bleed to death and be free of him at last. Good God, no wonder she didn't have a life; what a lame excuse for unhappiness. What is it with some women? It's always PMS or someone else's fault. If I ever start moaning how I'm gonna just die if some guy doesn't have the hots for me, please shoot me. I threw a pillow at the alarm clock and banged on it a few times just to shut it up. "Take a Pamprin, for cryin' out loud!"

I hate Sundays. Love Saturdays, hate Sundays. Saturdays are cool. Saturdays are about as far from school as you can get – day after Friday, two whole days till Monday. But Sunday rolls around and it's like, "Do you have clean clothes laid out for tomorrow? Homework all done? Ready for school?" They don't fucking let you forget about it. Sundays are almost more stressful than Mondays, because the anticipation just builds and builds and builds – damn, my head hurt just thinking about it. Had I finished all my homework? Well, Sunday was almost over. I don't know where it went, but it was over before it got off the ground, and I'm just as glad. I can't believe I'm saying this, but the fact that Monday was just a few hours away felt like a relief.

I rolled over and went to sleep.

And dreamed I was an angry bitch with PMS who was bleeding to death while gnawing happily on my lover's leg bone. Eeewww! (Yummy...)

"Christ!" I woke up in a cold sweat, panting heavily. Doubled over with a tight, knifelike pain in my abdomen, I felt a sticky dampness

between my legs and groaned. No wonder I was having weird dreams. I waddled to the bathroom and took care of things. Hate it when that happens. Rubbing the small of my back with a balled up fist, I made my way back to bed – only to realize there was less than an hour and a half till the alarm was to go off. I lay back against the pillows and moaned. I think I dozed off...

I was startled to hear tapping, tapping – clitter-clatter – against my window, like someone throwing fine bits of gravel against the glass. I walked groggily over to the window, pulled the curtain aside, and tried to focus my eyes in the purpling black haze of just-before-dawn. Suddenly, a face appeared directly in front of mine – luminous, comical, tragic – its contours exaggerated in the play of light and shadow from a waning moon and a struggling sunrise. It scrabbled desperately with long, sparkling nails at the glass, and looked at me with pleading eyes.

I'm such a sucker.

I let it in.

Before I could ask what it wanted, it slithered beneath the bed; I heard its nails scritching and scratching against the hardwood floor as it settled in and got comfortable. I shrugged and went back to sleep.

I dreamed of blood. Buckets, rivulets, rivers, lakes, oceans of the stuff. I took off all my clothes and swam in the warm, thick liquid, like that which had bathed me in the womb. I dove deep, opened my eyes, and saw the world through a crimson lens. Mr. Smythe, the English teacher was there, skinny dipping, leering at me as if he'd always known I could be lured naked into a pool full of blood for a quick swim. "Drink," he commanded, reaching out to wind his long fingers through my hair. I veered away from him, but there were others. Ms. Clark, the shy little math teacher, was propelling herself along like a porpoise, as naturally and powerfully as if she'd been born a sea creature. "Drink," she urged, her voice no louder than a whisper. They grabbed my arms, bound me with my hair, and held me under until I took a great gulp of the stuff. Despite my initial struggle, it was like fresh air to oxygen-starved lungs. I was euphoric. I wanted to float

there forever, but someone drained the tub – a great white porcelain thing with dragon-claw feet - and pulled me up by my hair just before I went swirling down the drain. I still felt this strange, tingling excitement – even if it was tempered with a sense of loss as the viscid elixir slurped and gurgled down into the plumbing and out of sight.

My friend Jace works at the blood bank, and she said it was creepy how excited they got over there every time they held a successful blood drive. Come to think of it, I don't remember the last time we had a serious need for blood at the ER – no one ever gets in accidents within 20 miles of Shady Corners – but they're always having a blood drive and giving away some kind of stupid prize. Last week it was glow-in-the-dark plastic vampire fangs. Isn't that just too precious?

The alarm clock went off with a shrill buzz, right in my ear. No sleeping through that, even if I did feel just as exhausted as when I tucked myself into bed. I never sleep well when I have cramps.

Running my tongue around my teeth, as if that alone might clean the fuzz off them, I felt something sharp-edged, like a razor. Damn! I must've broken one of my teeth, grinding them like I do in my sleep when I'm tense. I got up to take a look. Sure enough, one of my incisors was angled funny, its edge sharp as a straight razor that's been freshly stropped. I leaned my forehead against the mirror. I hate dentists. This would not be fun. I looked at the tooth again and sighed. I pulled my lips back in a toothy grin. It didn't look all that bad, hardly seemed lopsided at all. That's when I noticed it wasn't lopsided. I'd busted both incisors! I must've been really tense.

I got to class just before the tardy bell rang. Ooooh, shrill – I grabbed my throbbing head between my hands and pushed, wishing I could just stick my head in a vise and crank that puppy up tight as it would go. Ever had a migraine? This one was just pounding, pounding, pounding like a fucking jackhammer... What was it Mr. Smythe said? Christ, he looked as bad as I felt – his skin so pale you could almost see right through it! Must be the start of flu season, or something. He was smiling at me, nodding. "Yes, yes – excellent observation, Julia. And here I thought you'd been sleeping through

my class all semester." I had been. This throbbing in my head was unbearable – I don't even remember opening my mouth, let alone making an "excellent observation," and I have no idea what the hell we were supposed to be discussing in the first place.

Somehow, I made it through two more classes before the gnawing in my brain really got to me. I was in Ms. Clark's class (she looked like death-warmed-over, too – I really wished I'd remembered to get the flu shot this year) and the headache was all I could see or hear or feel or think or be at that point in time. I don't know what she asked me, and I don't remember answering, but she seemed inordinately pleased with my response. "Brilliant!" She exclaimed. "You'll make a fine mathematician, after all!"

What the fuck? I hate math. I don't know X from Y, and have no clue how to solve a quadratiwhatsit equation. I suddenly lunged for her throat. "Back the hell off me, bitch! Just leave me alone! I'll never be like you, never! As if I'd want to! Oh, God, get out of my fucking head!" I was tearing at my hair, too, and blood was pouring down the sides of my face, but I felt no pain.

Next thing I remember, I was in the teachers' lounge. I remember being vaguely surprised that Officer Fliegelmaus wasn't there to slap the cuffs on me and haul me off to Juvie after what I'd tried to do to Ms. Clark. I remembered that much. And it's strange, because of all the dumbass teachers in this school, Ms. Clark isn't so bad. It was just that fucking headache. The killer cramps weren't helping, either, but I didn't want to mention that. They weren't yelling at me, though; instead, they were scaring the shit out of me with how nice they were all being. Maybe I had a brain tumor or something. Ms. Clark knelt down beside me and stroked my hair. It seemed like all the teachers had heard about my little outburst by now; there must have been ten or a dozen or so standing around me, talking in soothing voices. Someone pressed a cup of something warm into my hands and urged me to drink. And suddenly, the headache was gone – just like that. Must've been Liquid Advil, or maybe something stronger – I don't

know, but I slumped over and drifted in and out of sleep as the waves of pain and nausea receded.

"Will she be okay?"

"Oh, she'll be better than okay. She's brilliant. A prodigy." Ms. Clark's voice drifted away as I fell down, down, down into sleep. I was back in the classroom, lunging for her throat, but this time she opened her arms to embrace me and I sunk my sharpened teeth (should've worn the bite guard last night!) into the translucent skin of her throat. Ecstasy! Dreams are weird. I think I sucked her dry and gave her a hickey. Dear God.

After that, my grades just skyrocketed. I didn't understand it, but it seemed to make the parental units happy. I mean, I wasn't working harder or anything, but the assignments and tests seemed ridiculously easy. As if I'd done it all before, over and over and over – well, you get the picture. We went out for a fancy steak dinner, white linen tablecloths and all, the night I brought home my first straight-A report card. Just for spite, I ordered the biggest badass steak on the menu. Very rare. "Mooooo!" I told the waiter. I didn't eat a bite of it, of course. Just slurped the juice off the plate as noisily as I could. Mom went white as a sheet, and dad's face turned purple when he saw the bill for the food I wasted, but hell, it was my party, right?

No more headaches, but I started wearing shades and avoiding bright lights, as if those might trigger another onslaught of cranial agony. Sunglasses at school – technically against the rules, but the teachers were cutting me a lot of slack lately, and no one said a word. I noticed that my eyes were bloodshot – as if the spidery little veins in my eyeballs had multiplied and divided in my sleep. Multiply and divide - Ms. Clark would've been ecstatic at the thought, no doubt.

The new school routine got pretty boring, pretty fast. Straight A's, ho hum. No challenge. Worse yet, I got tons of approval from the teachers. Held up regularly in front of the class as a shining example of what a little studying can accomplish. Oh, dear God – if I had any social life before (and it wasn't much to write home about in the first

place), that killed it. Just fucking killed it. Splat – my social life – dead on the cold tile floor.

I had to get out. I had to escape their clutches. I'm not stupid – I did catch on, just enough, to add two plus two and realize it equaled five. The weird cravings, the razor-edged incisors, the sudden stroke of "genius" – it had to be drugs. Or alien mind control. Some bizarre secret experiment conducted by the medical college in nearby Brighton's Bluff. And me – the freakin' guinea pig. Well, no more! With my brain cells operating in high gear, I figured I'd soaked up about all high school had to offer. I'd run away.

Six weeks into the second semester, I dumped the contents of my backpack in the middle of my bed and packed a few changes of clothes, my mp3 player, and the money from my piggybank (not enough for caps – probably never would be, now – but more than enough for bus fare to the far side of the country). I wrote a note to my mom and dad. Didn't figure they'd be too pleased to go searching all the gutters and emergency rooms in the county, only to find out that instead of fulfilling their lurid fantasies, I was alive and well and traveling Greyhound. That'd give whole new meaning to the "I'm so disappointed" lecture!

I couldn't leave in broad daylight, of course, so I laid back on the bed and closed my eyes. Scritch, scritch, scritch... My eyes flew open in the darkness. I don't know how long I'd been asleep, but the room was pitch black, and something was scuffling across my floor, scritch, scritch, scritch... Thump. What the hell? Then I heard a soft whoosh! as of a silk banner unfurling, and sensed a tangible presence at the foot of my bed. "Who's there?" I asked, trying to project the bravado that had fled me at the first faint scritch, scritch, scritching across my floor.

"We know you're thinking of leaving us, Julia."

"We can't allow it."

Oh, fuck me, there are two of them, I thought in horror.

"Um, who are you?" I asked again. I tried to stand, to run, but all the blood rushed to my toes and I had to sit down or fall over.

"Flick on the light, Smythe. This whole creepy Drac routine is just getting on everyone's nerves. I told you she wasn't into the whole vampire thing. We're just scaring her, now."

I recognized the voices, then; in a split second, light flooded the room and confirmed their identities. How did Ms. Clark and Mr. Smythe get into my room, anyway?

"Look, Julia, we have to talk." Ms. Clark looked down at me and smiled gently. She gestured towards the edge of the bed, asking permission with her eyes to sit next to me. I nodded. Smythe stood by the window. He looked – resigned. Maybe a little tired. I wondered if he was anemic. And that's when it hit me. Oh, shit on a shingle – he was anemic. Ms. Clark smiled; her white, oddly-angled incisors a mirror image of my own. Click, click – you could hear the gears in my brain, clicking into place. Well, well, what would you say to that? I mean, I'm wracking my brain for something brilliant to say right about now, and all I can do is squeak:

"Why me?"

Smythe sighed. "Because, Julia, you have such potential. We had only to unlock it – you see how easily you flew through your courses this year."

Huh. I'd always thought fish and carrots were brain food. Turns out it's blood, type O, breakfast of sharp-toothed champions.

"Oh, c'mon, Randall has waay more potential than me. Why not Randall?"

"Randall's a dweeb," sighed Mr. Smythe. "Look, Julia – we know this is a lot to take in right now, but the fact is, we don't have much time. Susan—Ms. Clark and I—have decided to retire. Frankly, we're

tired of teaching ignorant, insolent brats who haven't a care for what lies beyond next Friday, and we're in need of replacements. It's part of our contract, you see. And if we stay much beyond the end of the term, there's the school board and its suspicions to consider, you know. We've been here far too long. People are starting to notice things, like the fact that we don't age. It's time to move on."

"And what does that have to do with me?" I absently rubbed the back of my neck and tried to ignore the hunger pains that were rumbling loudly and rudely in my stomach.

"We're recommending you to take our place."

"At the rate you're learning, you could earn your college degree over the summer – if you do it over the Internet."

"We're sure the school board will approve. We have...ways."

"You mean that vampire hypnosis shit works? You can just make someone fall in a trance and do whatever you want?" Now that had possibilities... I snapped to attention, then. What was I thinking? Vampires? Was I actually buying any of this? And assuming this wasn't just some weird dream, the result of food poisoning, or something – was I gonna just sit here and take this? From them?

"Fuck you."

"Please. The kids might listen to you. You're one of them. You can...relate."

"Oh, no!" I laughed hysterically at that; they really had no idea what they'd done. If they'd relied on "you're one of them" to sell this idea, they were about to have their immortal souls crushed like cheap gravel. "You ensured that'd never happen when you turned me into superbrainiac. You should've picked Randall. You might've lowered his IQ a few points and made him more likeable, but nooooo..."

"Julia! Please..."

"They hate me." I shook my head. "You'll just have to start all over. I'd suggest Randall. Really. He's the better choice." I suppressed

a giggle and tried to look serious. "Yup, definitely Randall. He's your man."

Smythe turned to Clark. "I suppose we'd better go. We'd had such hopes, Julia. Such dreams for your future." He turned to me and smiled ruefully. "You're like the daughter we never had. We never imagined you'd turn on us this way – we thought you'd welcome the opportunity, the benefits it had to offer."

Ms. Clark rested her hand atop my head for just a moment. "There's no turning back, now, Julia. You are one of us. We can't force you to teach, but you'd be wise to stay among your own kind. You don't know what a cruel world it can be out there for a young vampire..."

"Thanks, really. I'll manage." You have to let go sometime...mom. I smiled reassuringly. Vampires. Christ! As they left, flying silhouetted against the moon, I picked up the phone to call Randall.

"Hello?"

"Randall? It's Julia. Remember telling me about that book by Bram Stoker and how you wished you could've been Dr. Van Helsing? Well, Randall...quickly now, get yourself some garlic and a nice, big, pointy stick..."

Innocence Denied

Sunlight filtered through the yellowing sheers, too soft to chase the shadows from the corners of the room, but bright enough to disturb Amanda's dreams. She tried pulling the covers over her head but the smell of bacon sizzling in the kitchen reached down and poked at her sleepy, dream-soaked brain, prodding her into wakefulness, and hunger.

Amanda stretched lazily. With a reluctant sigh, she threw off the covers, pulled on an old terrycloth bathrobe, and headed for the kitchen. Her eyes were gritty with sleep-sand, and her long, blonde hair was tousled from a restless night. Even interesting dreams weren't always pleasant.

Gramma turned the bacon, and smiled as Amanda bent to kiss her good morning. "Sleep well last night, dear?"

Amanda murmured something and nodded. "Can I help?" she asked, with a lack of enthusiasm she hoped was more subtle than it sounded to her as she said it.

"You could set the table and put the milk out."

The girl headed for the large refrigerator in the pantry. She pulled out the milk carton and glanced at the date. Inwardly, she groaned. She smelled the milk. Iffy, at best, but she knew it would do no good to mention that. There was at least a cup and a half--plenty for the breakfast cereal and coffee--and Amanda's grandparents, having lived through the depression, weren't about to waste a drop, as long as it didn't have obvious lumps. Nothing to do but put it on the table, and skip cereal.

Amanda set the table for three, using the good silver and the fine, antique china. Each of the cups was marred with tiny cracks, and the dishes were chipped, but Amanda loved them, for they were delicate, and beautifully hand-painted, a throwback to finer days. Like Gramma and Grampa, thought Amanda, with a small, rueful smile.

The stomp-stomp-stomp of Grampa's feet upon the steep, wooden stairs leading up from the cellar jarred Amanda from her reverie. "What's that you've got there?" Gramma's voice was demanding, tinged with annoyance.

"The peaches, Mama," sighed Grampa. "You said you wanted peaches with breakfast."

"So set them down, already." Gramma disappeared into the pantry and Grampa shrugged at Amanda. He began fiddling with the lid, his hands shaking.

Amanda grabbed the jar of peaches and peered at them dubiously through the pinkish-yellow liquid. She tested the seal--it gave a nice POP! as she opened the lid. The peaches were lovely. Amanda spooned them into a serving bowl and carried them into the dining room. Grampa brought the bacon, Gramma carried in boxes of cereal and unceremoniously plunked them down on the table. One last gurgle from the coffeepot, and breakfast was ready. The three of them sat at the table and began filling their plates--bacon, peaches, cereal (which Amanda avoided), and scrambled eggs. Amanda poured the hot coffee, which Gramma had percolated in an ancient coffeepot. It was strong and fragrant.

After breakfast, Amanda cleared the dishes, setting them on the kitchen table. Gramma filled the sink with hot, soapy water and began washing, while Grampa dried each dish carefully with a soft towel. It was a mealtime ritual that pretty much occupied the spaces between breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Amanda sighed.

"I think I'd like to read a bit before lunch," Gramma announced as she turned away from the sink, wiping her hands on her housecoat. "Amanda, do you think you can manage to entertain yourself, or would you rather get the cards? We could play a hand or two of Hearts--"

"No, Gramma, that's fine. I've got a good book in my room. Sounds like a plan to me."

"Good. Pops?" Gramma looked at Grampa, who was already engrossed in the morning paper. "Guess he's got a head start on us, Mandi."

Amanda nodded and headed for her room. The book was an excuse. She'd finished it last night. But she was in no mood to bicker over a game of Hearts. As soon as she heard the door to her grandparents' room close, she slipped out, and headed down the stairs to the cellar.

Down here among the boxes and the junk, Amanda felt strangely close to her grandparents. When she was with them, she felt herself closing up, pulling back, getting irritated at them for no apparent reason. Here, amidst the junk, the remnants of 60 years of marriage, Amanda caught glimpses of her grandparents as they really were--not the stodgy facades they showed to her, their teenaged granddaughter.

Amanda reached into an old, cardboard steamer trunk and pulled out a heavy, leather-bound volume. Blowing dust from the cover, she opened it. She pored through old photographs, yellowing with age. Her father was there, sitting on Grampa's shoulders. Grampa was young, tall; it shocked Amanda to realize that her grandfather had once been a handsome man, the sort of young man she, herself, might be attracted to. And there was funny, freckle-faced Aunt Julia, now a middle-aged wife and mother of three.

Gramma stood, smiling, dressed in a sumptuous ball gown, her make- up perfect, her silken, brown hair swept back and up in a chignon. God, she was beautiful. She couldn't have been more than thirty when the photograph was taken. Three children stood at her feet, Aunt Julia, Dad, and a tiny blonde girl, much younger than Julia. They clung to Gramma's skirts, smiling up at her in adoration.

Amanda turned the page. There she was again, the little girl with wide, innocent eyes and blonde hair. Curiosity prickled at the back of Amanda's neck. Who was she? Amanda flipped through the remaining pages, and there she was, over and over again. Several pages were damaged by water and mold, marring the faces beyond recognition. Amanda flipped over these quickly, wrinkling her nose in

distaste. A damp, Northern cellar was no place to store family treasures.

She did not see the little girl's face again, but the image haunted her. She thought of her as she browsed the prom pictures--Aunt Julia in taffeta and lace, Dad in a rented tux, a carnation tucked into his lapel. Aunt Julia's date was a long, lanky, pimply-faced teenager, well into that awkward stage; Dad's date had bright little squirrel eyes and was stuffed into a frilly dress three sizes too small for her. Amanda laughed until tears streamed down her face.

She laid the album aside. Digging into the steamer trunk, her fingers touched the dried and crumbling flowers of a bouquet, it's ribbons faded and crackling now. There was a dress, a pink satin dress with white lace overlays at the collar and on the sleeves. Aunt Julia's? Amanda wondered. Why, this must have been Julia's trunk, forgotten after all these years.

At the bottom of the trunk Amanda found a small book, a little cloth-covered notebook with the name "Claire" embroidered on it. Claire? Amanda took it over to the little makeshift desk she'd set up for herself down in the cellar.

An old, defunct, deep-freeze unit covered with a threadbare quilt, and an inexpensive student's lamp screwed into the wall overhead provided Amanda with a quiet place to read, draw, and write her stories during visits to Gramma's and Grampa's house. She hadn't exactly gotten their permission to do this little bit of "remodeling," but they'd never mentioned it, so she assumed they didn't mind. She sat upon a broken card-table chair, opened the little cloth-bound book, and began to read.

"Amanda!" her grandmother called from the top of the stairs. "Lunchtime!"

Reluctantly, Amanda closed the book and headed up the steep, dark, wooden stairs to the kitchen. She supposed the book could wait. "Set the table, will you, dear?" Amanda nodded and went to work. The mealtime ritual began again.

The three of them ate in silence. What could they talk about? A fifteen-year-old girl was an alien being in this environment. Amanda poured coffee and cleared the empty dishes. Still holding her grandmother's coffee cup, she asked abruptly, "Who's Claire?"

Gramma turned pale and choked on a bit of buttered bread. "Claire?" she rasped, taking a sip of the scalding coffee. "What on earth made you ask about Claire?"

"Who is she, Gramma? I found a diary--"

"Oh, leave it alone, Amanda. You won't find anything interesting in a moldy old diary. You really shouldn't be snooping around down there. It's unhealthy." Gramma muttered something Amanda didn't quite catch. "Get out in the sunshine. Why don't you take a nice walk this afternoon?"

This only piqued Amanda's curiosity further, but she decided not to push the issue. She kissed her grandmother lightly on the forehead, and smiled at Grampa. He seemed lost in thought, and deeply troubled. Later that afternoon, he came to Amanda on the back porch.

"I know you're curious, Mandi, but some things are better off left to the past. Some day you'll understand." He sighed. "Your Gramma is napping. Hearing you say Claire's name again was hard on her. That's why I'm going to tell you about her, so you don't mention her again."

Amanda reached out and touched her grandfather's hand. Her eyes were full of concern, but she still burned with curiosity. "Mandi, Claire was our daughter. She was the youngest." He paused. "She died. A long, long time ago. Before you were born."

Amanda sat in stunned silence. Another aunt, then. One she would never know, except through a few old photographs and a diary--and her grandparents. "Tell me about her. How did she die?"

Grampa looked sad. "Mandi, leave well-enough alone." He looked long and hard at Amanda. "She was very much like you. Young, and pretty, and smart--" he broke off and looked at the sky for a moment.

"Anyway, it's hard on your Gramma and me to talk about her. Can you understand that?"

Amanda couldn't. If it had been her daughter, she thought, she'd have wanted to talk about her to anyone who'd listen--not shuffle the memories off to the cellar. She sighed. It was stranger still that Dad and Aunt Julia had never mentioned Claire. Amanda was troubled, and dying of curiosity, but she didn't persist. Instead, she threw her arms around her grandfather, and kissed his bristly cheek. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Grampa laid a hand on Amanda's shoulder and smiled sadly. He looked as if he were about to say something, but the words died on his lips. He turned and went inside.

A moment later, Amanda heard a piercing scream. She leaped to her feet and ran inside. There, in the hallway, her grandmother lay sprawled upon the floor, Grampa huddled over her, calling her name, desperation and fear making his voice raspy. Amanda grabbed the phone and dialed 911. Her grandfather reached out, his hand lightning quick. "No," he commanded, his voice hoarse with emotion. "Call Dr. Franks. Not the hospital. She wouldn't--"

Amanda was already dialing. An ambulance would have been wiser, but her grandmother was terrified of hospitals, and Amanda wasn't going to argue about it now. "Dr. Franks's office."

"Get me Dr. Franks, please. It's an emergency." Amanda was surprised at how calm she sounded. Her grandmother lay helpless on the floor, and her grandfather was quickly going to pieces. Amanda took control. It was a strength, and a curse.

"Dr. Franks here." He had the voice of a young man, strong, clear, and vibrant. Yet Dr. Franks had to be in his 70's.

"This is Amanda Richards. My grandmother seems to have had an attack of some kind--she's unconscious. Please--"

"I'll be right there. Relax--I'm just around the corner. Have you called an ambulance?"

"No, I, she--" Amanda faltered.

"I know, hon, they're stubborn old coots. Is she breathing?"

Amanda checked. Gramma seemed to be breathing normally, in fact, she might simply have been asleep, except that she didn't usually nap in the hallway.

"I'm on my way." Dr. Franks hung up.

Amanda knelt beside Gramma, her eyes wide with fear. She reached out and touched her grandfather's arm. "It'll be okay, Grampa," she said, trying to sound more certain than she felt.

He bit his lip and nodded, tears welling in his eyes, little worry lines deepening the creases in his forehead. Amanda remembered the wedding pictures she'd found in the cellar, the way they'd smiled at each other, radiantly, triumphantly in love. Through all the years of bickering, the love remained, buried beneath the daily irritations and ordinariness of life. It was there, in her grandfather's eyes.

The doorbell rang. Amanda jumped to her feet and ran to open it. For a moment she blocked the entrance, staring open-mouthed at the man with the black bag. "Where's Dr. Franks?"

"I am Dr. Franks. Where is she?"

Amanda stepped aside, giving the doctor a clear view of his patient, lying motionless on the carpet. "Dr.--" Amanda's grandfather looked up, his mouth frozen in mid-sentence. "Who the hell--" he gasped. "Paul?"

"Yes."

"Where's your father?" Grampa's voice was raised, angry-sounding, as if he were accusing the younger man of impersonating a doctor.

Dr. Franks bent down and began examining Amanda's grandmother. "Ill. For some time now. I've taken over his practice." He checked the old woman's pupils for reaction to light, felt her pulse, listened to her heart, checked her breathing. "Mr. Richards, she's had

another stroke. It's a mild one again, I think, but she really should go to the hospital. I need to run tests to learn the extent of the damage."

"No." Grampa's voice was adamant. "She won't be going to the hospital."

"Let's get her onto the bed, then, at least. We can try to make her more comfortable." The two men lifted Gramma as if she weighed no more than a child. Their eyes met for a moment, and a shiver ran down Amanda's spine. A current of pure hatred ran between them, unspoken, yet tangible. It was more than a disagreement over hospitals, Amanda was sure of that much.

"Amanda?" Dr. Franks called the girl aside quietly.

"Yes?"

"Amanda, has anything upset your grandmother lately? Can you think of any reason for this attack?"

"No." Amanda thought for a moment. "Wait--"

"Yes?"

"This afternoon, just after lunch, I mentioned a book I'd found down in the cellar. I asked her who 'Claire' was--"

Dr. Franks went pale. "Claire." It was a statement, not a question. He just stared off into space. "God, Amanda. That was a long, long time ago."

"I didn't know. Grampa came to me afterwards and explained," Amanda sighed. "I didn't know. Nobody's ever mentioned her."

"No, they wouldn't. The old prudes. Propriety at all costs." Dr. Frank's eyes welled with tears. "Damn them to hell." Amanda was beginning to regret her foray into old steamer trunks and photo albums, but it was too late to turn back.

"Tell me about her!" she urged.

"Amanda." The doctor's eyes pleaded with her.

Amanda clenched her fists in frustration. "Not you, too," she cried. "You know about her, but you won't tell me, either. Why?"

Her grandfather came into the room just then. Dr. Franks wrote out a prescription and rose to leave. "Call me when she wakes," he said.

Amanda bit her lip and plucked the prescription from her grandfather's hand. She had to get out, get some fresh air; she might as well make herself useful. "I'll go." He handed her a twenty-dollar bill and watched after her as she left the dreary, somber house, her blonde hair gleaming in the sunshine.

"Claire," he murmured, and slowly, sadly, shut the door.

⁂ ⁂ ⁂

Amanda dozed lightly in the old oak rocker by her grandmother's bed. Sometime during the night, Gramma's eyes fluttered open. She cried out, muttering unintelligible sentence fragments, clawing at the blanket in terror. She awoke instantly, and dialed the doctor's number. "Gramma," she whispered, "he's on his way. You're going to be okay." Amanda prayed that was true. She woke her grandfather, and went to make coffee.

It wasn't true. Just before dawn, Amanda's grandmother looked up, wide-eyed, into the face of young Dr. Franks. "Paul," she gasped, clutching his hand.

"Don't try to talk, Mrs. Richards."

"Paul, you understand, don't you? There was no other way--" her lips stopped moving. Her heart--stopped. Dr. Franks smoothed the lines from her brow, and closed her eyes. He prayed silently that Claire would be more merciful than he felt at that moment.

A few hours later, Aunt Julia arrived. "Oh, Mandi, doll, how awful for you that you had to be here and see this." She hugged the girl tightly, and managed a warm smile. "Your dad's on his way, right?" Amanda nodded.

Grampa just sat there on the couch. They'd taken Gramma to the funeral home hours ago, and he hadn't moved or spoken a word since. Dr. Franks had agreed to stay with Amanda until Aunt Julia arrived, and now he greeted her with formality. "Mrs. Cutter."

"Paul."

He nodded politely, and headed quickly for the front door. "Paul, wait--" "Yes?"

"What happened?"

"Amanda," he said, taking the girl's arm gently. "You tell her. Maybe, just maybe, you can help each other understand. I sure as hell don't." With that, he threw open the door and walked out.

"Christ," muttered Julia. "What was that all about? Amanda?" She sat on the divan, reached into her purse, and drew out a Virginia Slims. "I really ought to quit. Don't remind me." She flicked her lighter, twice, and sucked hard on her cigarette. The end of it glowing bright, dimmed, glowed bright, and dimmed again. "All right, Amanda. What the hell was that all about?"

"I think it was about Claire."

"Claire?" Aunt Julia's eyes narrowed as they studied Amanda's face. "Jesus. Claire. After all this time. Why?"

"I found a trunk in the cellar. Some old photographs. A diary, I think--"

Julia sighed. "How much do you know about her, Mandi?"

"I know she was your sister. I know that she died. Grampa said I was a lot like her."

"No." Julia puffed quickly on her cigarette, but it didn't stop her hands from shaking. "You're not like her, Mandi."

"What happened to her, Aunt Julia? Why won't anybody tell me?"

"Amanda, it's not a very pleasant story. I'm sure nobody really wants to go into it. You really shouldn't pry, darling. It's ancient

history, and not all that interesting, really." Julia stood up and headed for the room at the end of the hall, her old room. "Try to cheer up and think of something else. For Grampa's sake."

"Aunt Julia!" Amanda cried. "Dammit!" Tears welled in her eyes. If Gramma was dead because she had mentioned Claire, she damn well wanted an explanation. The guilt was growing dark tendrils within her, breaking her apart, tearing at her insides like acid.

Julia sighed. "Claire was sixteen. Your father and I were away at college. She got herself knocked up. In those days, you didn't talk about it, you went away and had the baby, gave it up for adoption, and came back. The official story being that you were off at summer camp, or in Europe, or visiting distant relatives." Aunt Julia plopped back down onto the sofa. "Only Claire wouldn't go. She insisted on staying here--" Aunt Julia bit her lip. "I suppose she had some romantic notion about being near the father of her child."

"He didn't want to marry her?"

"Marry her?" Aunt Julia laughed bitterly. "Oh, I suppose he would have, but what kind of a life would that have been? Claire was a mere child, not terribly bright, and Paul--" Aunt Julia stopped.

Amanda's mouth dropped open. "Paul?"

"The doctor's son. Such a bright future ahead of him--already accepted at Yale--" Julia laughed bitterly. "Old Doc Franks shuffled him off fast enough. He and Mother and Dad took care of things here, while the Boy Wonder went off to make a life for himself."

"But he loved her, didn't he?"

"Oh, who knows. I think maybe he thought he did, but no one twisted his arm to get him on that train."

"And Claire?"

"Claire stayed behind. Sometime in her fifth month, she began to show, and Mother insisted that she have the decency at least to stay indoors. It was a difficult pregnancy, and toward the end of the eighth

month, she went into labor." Aunt Julia took a deep drag off her cigarette. "Mother refused to let her be taken to a hospital. Doc Franks delivered the baby here, at home."

Amanda waited. She knew what was coming. Aunt Julia stared at the far wall for several moments, took a deep breath, and said, "she died in childbirth, Amanda. Two days before her seventeenth birthday."

"And the baby?"

"I don't know, Mandi." Amanda sat in stunned silence as her aunt's words slowly sank in. "Amanda, they never mentioned the baby, and none of us dared to ask. Can't you imagine how painful it was for them? The shame they must've felt?"

Shame? thought Amanda. Shame that their daughter had had a child out of wedlock, or shame that they'd botched everything, and probably killed their youngest child? Amanda knew the answer. She shuddered.

You hypocrite, she wanted to scream at her aunt. You, who've had four husbands in the space of a dozen years? Why, her own father had lived with her mother for a year before they married. And yet Claire had been forced to go through pregnancy, a premature labor, and a difficult birth, in shameful secrecy, without proper medical attention, and it was okay? Where was Claire's child now? Was its birth such a scandal that her grandparents could turn their backs on their infant grandchild--all that remained of their youngest daughter? Amanda suddenly felt ill, and excused herself.

Amanda slipped out the back door and ran down the alley. She didn't plan where she was about to go, but she wasn't too surprised to find herself upon the steps to Dr. Franks's office. It was Wednesday, and he'd been up much of the night. The door was locked. She rang the bell. The sun was bright, and warm. The chill in the old house had given her goosebumps. It was good to escape for a bit.

There was no answer. She rang again. Just as she turned to leave, the door swung open. Paul Franks stood at the door, unshaven, hair disheveled, eyes red-rimmed and painful-looking. "Amanda," he said, the tone of his voice flat, dull-edged. "Come in." He held the door open for her. Not that he was enthusiastic about it, but he didn't turn her away, either.

"Dr. Franks--"

"Call me Paul. Sit." He motioned towards a leather chair in the sitting room that doubled as a waiting room. "She told you everything, didn't she?"

"Did she?" Amanda wasn't sure where to begin. Finally, she just blurted "Paul--the baby. What happened to the baby?"

He ran his fingers through his tousled hair. It was starting to turn gray at the temples, giving him a "distinguished" look that was not at all unattractive. He looked up at Amanda, searching her face for some clue as to how he should proceed.

"I don't know," he said softly. "Dad hustled me off to school, said it was all for the best. The Richards' refused to consider the thought of my marrying their daughter. They called her a child, and kept her under lock and key in that dismal place they called a home--" his voice broke, he struggled to control it.

"She died giving birth to your child."

"I know, with my father in attendance." Paul sighed. "Amanda, I begged them to tell me where the child was. My father said it died, but I don't believe that to this day. There was no death certificate, no burial record. Claire's out there in Floral Haven Memorial, under the shade of an old oak--I've seen her grave--" he looked into Amanda's eyes. "I loved her, you know."

"I know."

"But there's no sign of the child. Our child." Paul finally broke down and sobbed. He'd been drinking, Amanda could tell that now. She rose and left; he never looked up.

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"Dad, what happened to Claire's baby?"

Amanda's father looked at her strangely. "I don't know, babe. I imagine it died with her. All I know is that it was a difficult birth, almost a month early, with only old Doc Franks in attendance." He sighed heavily. "My guess is that the child died, too."

"Gramma and Grampa never talked about it to you?"

He laughed, but there was no humor in it. "Mandi, it was hard enough on them having to tell us the bare facts. They didn't go into details, and your Aunt Julia and I didn't push. They were in shock over what Claire had done--then, to have to deal with her death--" "In shock? They didn't care about Claire at all, did they, Dad? Let's be honest here," Amanda was shaking with rage. She still felt responsible, somehow, but she was angry, too. Full of Claire's wrath, she thought, inexplicably. "They were terrified someone would find out. Dad--" Amanda gasped, "there's not even a death certificate, or a grave, or anything for that child."

"Oh, honey, I know you think Gramma and Grampa were cold, and heartless, but back then it was a terrible scandal to be an unwed mother. Whatever they did, they did to protect Claire. You must believe they had only the best intentions."

"No. I think they did it to protect themselves. From gossip. From the ladies at Gramma's bridge club. From Grampa's cronies at the lodge. Claire loved Paul, and he loved her."

"Amanda, don't judge them too harshly. They've suffered enough--"

"The hell they have!" Amanda shouted. Her fingers flew to her mouth. She was as surprised as her father at her sudden outburst. She began to cry. It had been a long day.

"Honey, please, try to forget it. You'll help your Grampa get through these next few days if you try and be cheerful. Mandi, you never even knew about Claire until yesterday. Why does it suddenly matter so much?"

How could she explain? How could she explain to her father the sudden certainty that she could just disappear off the face of the earth tomorrow, and her entire family would make excuses, pick up, and go on with their lives? She rubbed her eyes. God, she was tired.

"Amanda, if it makes you feel any better, they cared. I came home from college for the funeral. Grampa was down in the cellar, hauling the old deep freeze down there. The compressor'd gone out or something, and he was going to tinker with it a bit. Mandi, it was the first time I ever saw my father cry. He didn't see me at first, and he just stood there, leaning over the deep freeze, sobbing." Amanda's father stopped, looked at Amanda, and smiled sadly. "Real men don't cry, remember? You know, I'm not sure he's ever forgiven me for catching him at it." Amanda smiled, but her heart really wasn't in it. "I found a trunk full of Claire's things, down in the cellar," she said. As soon as the words left her lips, she wondered why she'd said it.

"Will you show me, Mandi?" asked her father. "It's been a long time." They smiled at each other. Her father reached out and took her hand.

They descended the steep, wooden, cellar stairs together. The stomp-stomp-stomp of their feet on the old wood echoed off the cool stone walls. It was dark and damp down here. Amanda quickly went over to her desk and switched on the light. Her father lifted up the little cloth-bound book and flipped through the pages. He sat down on the broken card-table chair, and began to read, tears welling in his eyes.

"Amanda." He put the book down softly on the quilt-covered, deep- freeze desk. "Jesus. Didn't anyone ever teach you not to snoop around in old trunks and attics and things?" He reached over and touched her cheek, brushing a stray hair out of her face. "Some things are packed away for a reason."

He looked at the desk. "What's this?" he asked, lifting the quilt up. Suddenly he pulled the quilt off the freezer and stared at it, as if remembering something.

"Amanda, go upstairs."

"What?"

"Just go upstairs," he said, tugging at the lid to the deep-freeze. Years in the damp basement had sealed it tight. "Now, Amanda!" She started up the stairs slowly, reluctantly.

Wedging the heels of his hands into the ridge where the lid was stuck shut, Amanda's father pushed with all his strength, but still it didn't budge. Looking around he spotted a crowbar hanging from the wall halfway up the stairs. "Amanda, wait. Bring me that crowbar off the wall there beside you."

Amanda lifted the crowbar off the hooks that held it to the wall and carried it down to her father. Silently, she handed it to him and stepped back. He didn't seem to notice her, and she made no move to leave. Taking a deep breath, Amanda's father put the edge of the crowbar under the handle of the deep-freeze. His shoulders tensed as he put ever-increasing pressure on the bar. With a sudden popping sound the lid finally sprang open, and Amanda's father stumbled backwards. As she moved to steady him, Amanda caught a glimpse inside the old freezer, just before the lid slammed down. She screamed.

Teen Angel

Ethan slipped his fingers into the waistband of Eliza's jeans, causing the girl to squirm with naughty pleasure. He wiggled them, sliding them lower. "I'm standing here until you make me move," he whispered, tickling her ear with his warm breath and the tip of his tongue. Eliza cried out, stifling a giggle.

"What are you two doing up there?" A stern voice carried up the stairs to Eliza's room, dampening but not quelling the teens' desire for one another.

"Practicing for the concert, Mrs. Jones!" Ethan's voice was husky, strong. Such was the power of love.

Eliza reached out for her violin and improvised a tune. "Ethan's teaching me the left-hand Suzuki Method, mom," she yelled. Just then, Ethan pressed himself against her, ruining her tonalization, causing horsehair to screech across taut wire like a cat in heat. "It's, um, really hard." Ethan laughed and kissed the back of Eliza's neck. Just then, something popped, and Ethan yelped in pain. His hand flew to his cheek; he was alarmed to see blood on his fingertips. "Damn," muttered Eliza. "My G-string broke."

The mood spoiled for the moment, Ethan kissed Eliza and left in search of a Band-Aid for his face.

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"So, there I was, standing outside a broken phone booth with money in my hand, and along comes this gorgeous chick with a cell phone. '"Who ya gonna call?' she asks. I stand there, stammering—she's got eyes the color of amethysts and sapphires, and she's just, y'know, staring at me—and I say, 'you.'"

"Oh, man, that's lame." Ethan rolled his eyes and laughed.

"What did she say?" George took another bite of his burger. He slopped up some ketchup with a limp French fry, and popped it into his mouth.

"She says, 'well, I'm here now, so I guess we won't be needing this,' and she tosses the cell phone in the trash."

"You gotta be kidding me." Jimmy John wasn't buying a word of this shit. No girl would throw away a perfectly good cell phone for Parker, even if he did have the sexy, brooding Abercrombie look and enough charm to have half the girls at Fossy High following him around like zombies.

"No, man, no shit—I'm serious! So then we get into her car—a '57 Chevy, shiny and new—it's parked a couple of blocks away—and she drives up to Pinnacle Point at like, 90 miles an hour—"

"And you wet your shorts, right?"

Parker glowered and growled good-naturedly. He grabbed a handful of fries and threw them at Ethan. "No, jerk, stop projecting. We got to the Point, and she's all over me—and suddenly, I'm thinking about Trisha, and it's just not working, you know? Then psycho-woman here gets really pissy and says, 'So what are you, like, a virgin?' and before I can answer, she shoves me out the car door and peels rubber, leaving me up there on the Point! Alone." Parker picked up his dill pickle spear, waggled it, and bent it till it broke with a "snap!"

"Now that's humiliating," said George, nodding with sympathy.

"Aww, consider yourself lucky, dude. Girl like that has...expectations." Jimmy John pulled himself up to his full height and flexed a bicep.

"Oh, and you think you could satisfy her, do you?" Ethan laughed. Never mind what Parker had told him about his girlfriend Trisha, Eliza's cousin; as far as he knew, every guy at the table was a virgin. He'd almost changed that, this afternoon, but Eliza's mother and a broken G-string had thwarted his intentions. He wasn't in a mood to share his own humiliating story just yet. We're guys, he thought. We don't talk about—the little things that we do without. Let the guys assume he'd cut himself shaving.

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The phone rang. Eliza grabbed it before anyone else had a chance to pick it up. "Hello?"

"Hey, wild thing." Ethan loved the sound of his girl's voice. He loved the way she always answered on the first ring, glad to hear his voice on the other end of the line.

"Hey, stud."

"Got any plans for tonight?"

Eliza hesitated before answering, knowing she had Ethan hanging by a moment. "Yeah, I've got a date. He should be here by seven. If he's not, though, I'll go out with you."

"Mmmm. Promise?"

"Promise."

"See you at seven, then."

"Better be prompt or hope the phone doesn't ring again."

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Parker caught a glimpse of the candy-apple red Chevy in his rearview mirror, just before it pulled out to the left and whizzed by him. He did a quick double-take. It was her. He couldn't have said why, but he had a sudden impulse to follow her. The woman drove like a bat out of hell, and Parker—despite his daredevil reputation—had trouble keeping up. It was summer, that mad season, and for 17-year-old Parker it was time to throw caution to the wind. He floored it and managed to keep the blue-eyed babe in sight. They took the coastal highway curves at dizzying speeds; twice, Parker fishtailed and fought to keep his old beat-up Ford from crossing a line into outer space. His palms were sweaty; his tongue was sandpaper-dry. As they turned off to Pinnacle Point, it hadn't yet occurred to Parker that he might be out of his depth.

Parker pulled over to the edge of the cliff and tried to pull himself together. His mystery woman already had him figured for the virgin he was; it wouldn't do to have her see his hands shake or hear the

nervous crack in his voice. "Damn," he muttered. He'd pushed the old Ford up over 110 miles an hour and lived to tell about it. With the adrenaline pumping through his veins, Parker took a deep breath and grinned. "Damn! Hell YES!" he pounded the palms of his hands against the steering wheel and let out a loud whoop of joy.

A soft tapping at the window got Parker's attention. "You following me, boy?" The mystery woman's lips curved into a sly, knowing smile. "You've been talking about me, haven't you?" she asked, her voice as sweet, her tones as rich as honey. "Didn't your mother teach you better than to talk about your –um, exploits? I hear Trisha can hardly hold her head up in school for all the talk that goes on behind her back, thanks to you."

At that, Parker startled. It was clear to him now that theirs was no chance encounter. Sure, he'd bragged a little—but what was it to this woman? She wasn't Trish's mom. Except for the other day, up here on Pinnacle Point, he'd never laid eyes on her. Suddenly, she creeped him out—left his skin feeling like it was covered with ghastly things crawling in the dark—and for the first time, he actually did come close to wetting his shorts. "What do you want?"

"To see if you're as good as you think you are, studmuffin." With that, the woman leaned into the car and pressed her voluptuous lips to Parker's, forcing his mouth open with her tongue. "Mmmm," she murmured. "You taste... like... fear." With that, she slipped the car out of gear and shoved, harder than Parker would have imagined possible, given her slight build. Workouts with a personal trainer and weekly Kung Fu fighting lessons had helped. Lily Jones was no shrinking violet. The battered Ford tipped over the ledge as Parker scrambled towards the backseat, desperately trying to figure a way out of the car that wouldn't push it right over the cliff. Lily reached down and grasped the rear bumper with her right hand, as Parker unlatched the back door with his left.

"Oh, for God's sake, lady, you know none of that was true—you, of all people, know I'm a virgin!"

Unfortunately for Parker, the car's engine outweighed him, there was nothing in the trunk, so it wasn't difficult for Lily to lift the rear end of the car and tip the balance in her favor. "Bye bye, sweetcakes, your reputation's safe with me," she said, watching dispassionately as the car slid, then cartwheeled into space, landing seconds later with a sickening crunch and the whoosh of flames.

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"Mom?" Eliza hopped out of the car and hurried to her mother. The woman was distraught, and understandably so.

"Oh, thank God, Eliza! I came up here looking for you two, and—" She pointed toward the base of Pinnacle Point. Unable to speak, she looked at Eliza in horror.

"We need to call an ambulance!" Ethan yelled. He recognized the old Ford as Parker's, and knew that it was hopeless. The car was engulfed in flames, its rear-end charred and horribly twisted. The atmosphere was charged with pathos and tragedy. "Teen Angel" came on the radio, playing softly in the background.

"You needn't yell, dear. It's just us here, and we can hear you fine." Mrs. Jones seemed oddly composed, after telling her story to the two teens.

"Mom, where's your cell phone? We need to call 911. Now."

"Lost it. I—uh, think it may have been stolen." Mrs. Jones looked at Eliza and Ethan and sobbed helplessly. "That poor boy..." She leaned against her candy-apple red '57 Chevy and laughed silently through the make-believe tears of a clown.

IMMORTAL BELOVED

Impatient, full of youthful eagerness and anticipation, it seems that the rusty gears of time grind to a halt, standing still just to taunt us. And just when true joy is in our grasp, time stokes the boilers and revs up its engines like a steam-powered locomotive, depriving us of the ability to savor the moment at leisure. It is gone in the blink of an eye, so we must be careful, so very careful, not to miss it.

That is how it was on cool moonlit nights in Luxor, when Amalia and I strolled arm and arm along the banks of the Nile, absorbed in one another's eyes, oblivious to the laughter of tourists on glittering paddleboats, lulled by the rhythmic clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop of horses' hooves as they pulled decorated hacks filled with the idle rich and their sparkling jewels.

Amalia. She was only twenty-two when she first strode into the desert, dressed like a man, and tried to take charge of a rag-tag, illiterate bunch of diggers. Her father, Alex Stafford, was a famous archaeologist and had worked in the region for several years. As a child, Amalia often accompanied him in the field, carefully brushing dust and sand from a funerary urn, a small statue, or a finger bone – it mattered little to the child what it was, so long as her father smiled his absent-minded approval at her. He was rather distant, emotionally, but Amalia knew that her gentle dexterity with a paintbrush pleased him, and archaeology provided a safe topic on which they could converse. She wore a boy's khaki trousers and an oversized cotton shirt, and flourished under the sweltering desert sun despite the lack of a woman's hand to guide her. Her mother refused to join the expedition in Egypt; she preferred the cooler, more refined, more sterile environment of the English countryside. Alex deferred to his wife's wishes in most things, but on one point he stood firm; the little urchin would travel with him until she was old enough to go to school. Amalia's bright, shining eyes and her avid interest in antiquities gave father and daughter a bond that the mother would never understand.

In due time, of course, Amalia returned to Europe for a proper, ladylike education. And in due time, her mother managed to finagle a suitable match for her: a bloodless work-obsessed financier of ample means whose only purpose in taking a wife was to eliminate the necessity of refusing the numerous, unwanted invitations showered upon any wealthy bachelor under the age of eighty-two and capable of walking on two legs. Amalia had thrown a most unladylike fit and threatened to return to Cairo, against her mother's wishes. Her fiancé, recognizing her for a young woman of remarkable intelligence and good sense, offered to arrange her passage to Egypt within a fortnight, if only she would do him the honor, et cetera, et cetera. Understanding blossomed where love could not, and Amalia gave the lucky chap – his name was Edgar – her hand, her smile, and the respectability that can only be conferred upon a man when he takes a suitable wife. They did not see one another again for a full year.

Upon her return, Amalia was confronted with the horrible news that her father had disappeared from a dig site near Luxor, in the Valley of the Kings. There was no sign of foul play, but it was very unlike Mr. Alex Stafford to vanish without a word to the workers for days on end, and he had been gone nearly a week when the daughter arrived.

Practical Amalia, reasoning that her father would never abandon a dig site without a word to the foreman, quickly took charge of the situation and ensured that everyone continued with his work. Meanwhile, she questioned each of the diggers and hired a slew of private investigators to look into her father's disappearance.

I could have saved her the trouble. Alex Stafford had gone to join the pharaohs; he died blissfully in the arms of an ancient evil, known by the name Nofritari, spoken only in whispers for fear of invoking her presence. He died in the arms of an evil that was once flesh, and blood, and womanly charm. An evil who once claimed me for her own.

"Well," I said, catching her in the act. She looked up from the ruined body of Alex Stafford, the human I had come to think of as

"friend." His blood ran in bright, slick rivulets down her chin. Her eyes were wild with deadly lust; she bent her head like an animal and returned to her frenzied feeding. "That's going to cause a bit of a stir. Lost your taste for Bedouin digger, have you?"

Guttural noises, a low growl, and the sound of gristle ripping from the joint were her only response. In two thousand years, she acquired horrendous table manners. I walked away in disgust. At our age, it was hardly necessary to feed like insatiable gluttons on human blood; certainly, we could satisfy our legitimate needs with a pint or two, leaving our "victims" anemic but unharmed. In Nofritari's case, it was an ugly addiction, and a damned unattractive one to watch her indulge.

I had liked Alex Stafford; I had sat with him many nights in front of his tent. We spoke of the great philosophers of Greece; we sang the praises of great men of science whose ideas were before their time – Galileo, Columbus, Fallopius (well, old Gabriel was onto something, even if he didn't quite know what)... During our nightly discourse, Stafford assumed I was a scholar from the University of Cairo. I did not disabuse him of the notion; the truth would have been too terrible for his mortal mind to contemplate.

Seeing, now, how distraught his daughter was, and knowing, as I did, how hopeless her search had been from the beginning, I flew into a rage. I hunted down the callous, evil Nofritari, and I ripped her head off with a quick twist and a yank, much as one plucks an under-ripe melon from the vine. I like to think it was as much of a relief for her, finally, as it was for me. We had grown tired of each other – even of life itself - after two millennia and more.

I sought out Stafford's daughter; I befriended her. I was delighted to find in her a woman of intellect as keen as that of her father, for I had greatly missed our philosophical discussions and debates.

A year passed. Under Amalia's efficient direction, many great treasures were unearthed at the Luxor site. Fortunately, Nofritari had disposed of Stafford's bones far from the dig, sparing Amalia the one discovery she both feared and longed to find. For so long as Stafford

was missing, the girl was tied to this place – her heart and soul already captives of the canopic jar that was the Valley itself.

For this, I was perversely grateful to Nofritari. I know that it was grossly unfair, but several thousand years of living would corrupt even Solomon's sense of justice. Amalia was mine, for a time, and this was Nofritari's doing, whether she'd intended it or not. What made the girl's captivity even more delicious was that she couldn't bear to sleep; in her grief and desperation, she became a nocturnal creature, like me.

We walked together in the moonlight, on a pale streak of silver sand, through the Valley of the Kings. We enjoyed the splendor of long-dead pharaohs' tombs and each other in ways we could not have done in the heat of the mid-day sun. Her long, thick golden hair reflected the brilliant light of the full moon. Looking at her, I thought her a goddess. She never asked why I preferred night to day, and when she gazed upon my face with her wide, blue, trusting eyes, I felt like a god. The faint stirrings of a half-remembered emotion caught me unaware as my heart, that long-dormant and now-irrelevant organ, thundered in response to her touch.

Cruel irony. I would have made her my consort throughout eternity, but for one small, significant matter: it was Amalia's warmth; her tender, fragile mortality; her trusting and childlike innocence, that made me feel alive. For an instant, I saw the world made fresh through her eyes, and forgot to tint it the bilious green of my own jaded soul. For her, a lifetime; for me, a capricious blink of God's eye.

She would have stayed with me. As I said, hers was a marriage of convenience. But Edgar could give her what I could not. I could only offer death and unlife, the illusion of immortality. Only Edgar possessed the key to real immortality, for he could give her children.

"Oh, but I'd make a terrible mother!" Amalia cried, laughing at me the first time I suggested it. I did not argue; it would not have been proper. But having planted the seed of an idea, I tended the garden, watering and fertilizing it every now and again.

"Your father would have said something like that, I imagine."

"Oh, no – my father was wonderful! We had such fun in Cairo, when I was just a child. He opened my eyes, taught me how to see the world!" Amalia stopped. She looked at me from the corner of her eye. "Oh, you are too clever. You are a demon."

"Yes. A demon who loves you, but who cannot have you. It would please me, though, to see you happy."

"Mmm. And you think that a woman must have children to be happy, do you?" Amalia laughed, suddenly. "I think men would like to imagine that is so, if only to get us with children and keep us occupied while they pursue other diversions."

"Is that how it is with you and Edgar?"

"No. I'm the one who has always pursued other diversions. The Nile – oh, Senet, this is my home. This is where my blood sings. Look at the colors in the bazaar! Smell the kebab cooking on the coals in the market. See the barefooted urchins running wild? This is my life." She sighed. "No, Edgar is the steady, reliable one."

Just as suddenly as the laughter had come, so did the tears. "Perhaps you are right, Senet. Edgar has written to me that he is feeling his age. He has hinted that it would be nice to have an heir, but he would never insist. When Edgar makes a bargain, he honors it." Amalia chewed on her lower lip, almost to the point of drawing blood.

I longed to say to her, Here, let me...

"You think it is the right thing to do, don't you?"

It tore my heart in two, but I nodded.

And so my mortal love returned to England and to the arms and bed of a man whom I had never met. Even so, I had grown to despise and love him with the same breath. Edgar was good to her, and he would endow her with the everlasting life that I could not.

As I watched her depart the camp, I thought I heard Alex Stafford's voice on the wind. Well done, Senet. Well done, old boy.

The old woman led her daughter through the Temple of Karnak. "I don't know why, Charlotte, but I have always preferred Luxor by moonlight. Perhaps it is the shadows the obelisk casts, or perhaps..." She paused, then shook her head as if to clear the memories. "Tomorrow we go to the Valley of the Kings."

"If you're up to it, Mama." The younger woman held the older woman's elbow, steadying her.

"Impertinent brat," muttered the mother, yet there was nothing but affection and indulgence in her tone. She stood a little straighter, lifted her chin, and said in a clear, steady voice, "Of course I'm up to it!"

That flash of blue defiance in those eyes! Ah, it stabbed me in the heart. I flattened myself against the cool, stone wall of the Hypostyle Hall; but of course, she wouldn't know me after all this time. Her mind would not accept, and her eyes would move on. I kept still...

"You, there! Come out of the shadows." Amalia looked at me sternly. "I won't stand for this skulking around. I know that you are following us, and I demand to know what mischief you're about, young man!"

Young man! I choked on laughter; tragic as it was, it struck me terribly funny that she, who was but a child to me, should call me young. I stepped out of the shadows, smiling. I held out my hands, palms upward – see? No tricks up my sleeve, no mischief here. Just a little illusion, a folding of the fabric of time – but would she know me for who and what I was? I held my breath.

"Senet?" she whispered. "It can't be, and yet..."

Her daughter looked thoroughly perplexed. "You know this man, mother?"

"She knew my father, I think." I smiled, and winked at Amalia.

She nodded. "That's right. I'm an old woman, I forget that that was then and this is now... You look so like your father," she said, sighing. She reached out one wrinkled, arthritic hand and stroked my

cheek. And then, my heart leapt with wonder! She smiled slowly, understanding dawning like the sun upon her face - she winked back. My heart felt light as a cloud, heavy as a lead weight.

The next day, we visited the Valley where she and I had walked and talked and made love so many years ago. Her daughter's eyes were filled with wonder as Amalia told her vivid tales about her grandfather and her own experiences as a young girl, working at the dig site. She did not mention me, and I gathered from their conversation that Edgar had died nearly two decades earlier.

Why didn't you come back? I longed to ask. I waited...

Charlotte climbed the stairs to the majestic tomb of Hatshepsut, leaving me alone with my beloved Amalia. She took my hands in hers. "I had a good life, Senet. A good, long life. Oh, don't look so grieved to hear me say it; to me, it was a good, long life." She grinned, but a moment later, a cloud passed over her face and dimmed its radiance. "It isn't good to watch them die, is it, Senet? All those we love?"

I shook my head, mute and humbled by her understanding.

"You have suffered. How long? No, don't tell me. My father didn't imagine it, did he? There are such beings here, and I am only sorry I dismissed them as fairy tales whenever he tried to speak of it to me."

It was my turn to smile. So, he had known about us, or suspected. I nodded.

"If you had asked me, Senet, all those years ago – I would have gladly traded this life for eternity by your side. You knew that, didn't you?" Amalia leaned on me a little, and I sensed that she was tired. Not just of walking, but of living.

"I had two children, Senet. Charlotte, here – and another. A son. His name was Sean Alexander." Amalia's voice trailed off into silence, and her eyes focused on a point far away from Egypt, but closer than England, I think. "Normandy," she said. And I knew then that she had suffered; I wished that I could turn back time and change the

course of it – oh, selfishly I had thought to grant her happiness, and had brought her despair instead!

"No, Senet – do not be sad for me. I wouldn't have traded those fleeting moments for the world; not even to spend eternity in your arms. You were right, you know. I was a good mother." Amalia grinned and looked after her daughter, who was coming back down the steps very carefully. "My time comes soon, I think. I will see Sean Alexander again; I can feel them waiting for me." She touched my arm. "Just as you waited for me."

I heard Death's approach that night, and would have thrown myself between them if I hadn't loved her as I did. The next morning, a letter came by courier – a ragamuffin street urchin who held out his hand and cried "Baksheesh! Baksheesh!" I hastened the entrepreneurial child's departure with a few coins, and tore open the letter.

Do not grieve for me, Senet. I know the joys and pain of one lifetime, and that is enough. It is I who grieve for you.

Yes, yes – I did the right thing. Now time stretches endlessly before me, and each night is longer, darker than the last. I have made up my mind, just now – if I cannot see the sun rise in Amalia's eyes, as she looks lovingly into mine, I would watch it with my own. And so, I set out for the Valley of the Kings, as the blackness of the night sky fades to rosy purple.

Troop #66613

Starr Darkside pulled up to the curb in front of Sammy's 24-Hour Grocery Emporium. Eight little girls, from Adventure Scout Troop #66613 hopped out of the van, ready to unload and set up shop on the brightly-lighted sidewalk in front of Sammy's. They had landed prime curbside space at an hour guaranteed to bring them customers with a case of the munchies. Their troop leader, Starr, opened the rear doors and helped the girls pull out a large, folding table and chairs. Two girls started unloading cartons of cookie boxes.

"Let's set them up in a pyramid shape!" cried Elvia, the youngest. She collected pyramids of all shapes and sizes, and despite her tender age, could be considered something of an expert in Egyptian funerary arts.

"They'll topple over, silly," chided Moira. "Line them up just like the headstones at Arlington." Moira, the oldest, had just gone on a field trip with her class to Virginia, and was enthralled with the orderly white rows of markers. Math being her best subject, she had even insisted on counting them and determining the percentages of the dead buried there by decade.

The girls finally decided on a neat row of smaller pyramids, organized by cookie type and aligned under the direction of Moira, who insisted that each pyramid must be constructed out of the same number of cookie boxes.

Bella and Donna offered to take the first shift, selling the cookies. They were twins, and almost impossible to tell apart. Bella had a little dark purple fleck in the topaz-blue iris of her left eye; Donna had a golden speck on her right eye, and a habit of biting the nail on her left index finger.

"It still needs something," mused Lily. Lily was very big on "presentation," and had decided that she wanted to be a chef or an interior designer when she grew up, despite her limited diet and a personal penchant for pine and crimson silk. "I know!" Lily reached into her purse and grabbed some dried and blackened rose petals,

which she artfully tossed between the boxes and around the table. "A wreath would have been so much prettier," she said ruefully. "I wish I'd thought of it earlier."

"Very nice, girls," said Starr, proud that her girls were cooperating so well. She emptied a few cookies from her own stash into a bowl so the girls could give out samples, if their engagingly toothy grins weren't enough to convince potential buyers. "Now we just sit back and wait for some customers. Elspeth, stop chewing your lower lip!"

Starr sighed. Elspeth had a habit of biting and sucking the inside of her lip until her mouth was red with blood. She had even bitten down so hard, once, that she broke a tooth. Elspeth's mother had had a fit. It had taken weeks to find a doctor who understood that her child needed nice, pointy crown to match the corresponding tooth on the other side, and did not want the other ground down to match the broken one.

"Sorry, Mrs. Darkside."

"Oh, look," said Starr, pointing across the nearly deserted parking lot. "A customer!"

The girls perked up a bit and smiled invitingly. It was an old man wearing a worn, plaid flannel shirt and blue twill pants. He walked slowly, his back slightly bent with the weight of his many years. His eyes were clear and bright, and missed nothing. He nodded curtly, and looked as if he would walk right by their table without buying, given half a chance.

"Would you like to buy some Adventure Scout cookies, sir?" asked Rowan. The little girl clutched a ragtag wax doll in one hand beneath the table, and surreptitiously dug her fingernail into its tummy. Be hungry, she thought, smiling sweetly at the old man.

He stopped abruptly and turned like a puppet on a stick. "How much?" he asked, blinking. He looked less sure of himself than he had when he walked up to the curb.

"Three dollars a box," said Bella and Donna in unison.

Sam Raven's wife had him on a strict diet, but cookies would go so nicely with the milk she'd asked him to pick up from Sam's. He studied the interesting arrangement of boxes on the table, considered his choices, and decided that he could counter Elsie's disapproval by buying the low-fat Raspberry Puff Pastry Crème cookies. She might even let him have two or three of them before bed.

"I'll take a box," he said, digging three rumpled dollar bills from his pants pocket. "Thank you, ladies."

"Thank you, sir," the girls said politely.

"Ooooh! Would you look at that?" said Elvia, pointing towards Always Best 24-Hour Food Mart across the street. "Troop #317's brought a—-a unicorn!"

"What?" cried Starr, staring at their rivals. "What kind of stunt is that?"

"Betcha they're all working on their Marketing badges," grumbled Moira.

"Or their Care of Mythological Creatures badge," sneered Rowan. "Only I think they're going to fail that one – they've painted the poor thing green."

Starr cringed. She had no love of unicorns, but she could almost feel sorry for this one. The girls in Troop #317 had indeed painted the horny horse a bilious green, and sprinkled it liberally with shimmer dust, the latest teenage fad. Her girls wouldn't be caught alive wearing the sparkly cosmetic they'd dubbed "fairy dust."

"Oh, gross," said Linda. Even rosy-cheeked, sunshine-blonde Linda, whose taste for pastels and romance novels the other girls tolerated only because they adored her, had no tolerance for the perky, cute, giggly, innocent, sickly-sweet dispositions of the girls from Troop #317. "Isn't that against some rule or something, Mrs. Darkside?"

"I'm afraid not, girls," sighed Starr. Discouraged, she watched a crowd of curiosity-seekers gather around the unicorn. It quickly

became obvious that in order to pet the unicorn, customers had to buy a box of cookies.

"That's just underhanded," growled Lily. "Maybe we should've brought Dudley along."

Starr ruffled the girl's hair and smiled sadly. "Most people don't want to pet a bat, honey. Remember how long it took us to get Linda to hold Dudley?"

Rowan laughed at that, remembering Linda's fear and revulsion when they'd first caught Dudley and made him the Troop Mascot.

Linda blushed. "Well, I like him now!"

"I know, sweetie. But I don't think Dudley would help us sell cookies." Poor little Linda. She would never grow nice, sharp, pointy incisors. Linda belonged to the world of cookie eaters. Already she harbored a secret passion for vegetables and chocolate. Much to Starr's chagrin, the girl even ordered her burgers well done. When the rest of the girls drank nice, healthy, warm blood, Linda drank cherry-flavored Kool-Aid. Starr considered it a small miracle that Linda wasn't in Troop #317, herself.

"I'm hungry," whined Elvia.

"Well, kids, we have to sell at least ten more boxes to buy a pint. Split eight ways, that's hardly even a snack. And with a puke-colored unicorn prancing around over there, it's not likely we'll sell any more tonight." Starr sighed. Why did it always have to be so hard to do things the right way, the Adventure Scout Way? She longed to fold up their table, ditch the cookies in the dumpster behind the store, and take the girls on a nice nocturnal hunt.

"Why'd they paint the poor thing green?" asked Bella.

"Because it's almost St. Patrick's Day," answered Donna, wrinkling her nose with disgust.

Just then, three beefy teenaged boys, members of the local high school football team, stumbled up to the table. It was clear that they

had been drinking beer; Starr could smell it on their breath. She steeled herself for trouble.

"Hey, ladies, wassup?"

"Would you like to buy some Adventure Scout cookies?" asked Lily.

Rowan pressed her thumb into the doll's softened wax belly and bent it slowly at the waist. One boy spun away from the table and vomited in the parking lot.

"Oh, Joel, man, that's sick." The other two giggled at him, then remembered they were trying to look cool for the girls.

"Hey, baby, I don't have any money, see, or I'd buy some of those cookies from you sweet things. How about givin' us some, anyways, jus' to be nice?"

Rowan looked at the boy with wide eyes and suddenly pinched off a bit of the doll's tummy wax, making it look a little like an anorexic Austin Powers. The boy's eyes flew open wide with shock as he doubled over and howled in pain.

"Are you boys okay?" asked Starr, flashing a quick look of disapproval at Rowan.

"Maybe some cookies would help settle your stomachs!" added Linda brightly.

"I think maybe I have some Pepto-Bismol in the van, if you think that'd help," said Starr. "We were just finishing up here, anyway. If you could help us carry these things back to the van, I'll see what I can do for that stomach ache."

"Uhh, sure, lady. Yeah," said the tall one, called Ronnie. He pointedly let his eyes travel slowly up, then slowly down, Starr's generous curves. Meanwhile, Jake was flirting with Bella and Donna, licking his lips as he indiscreetly fantasized about the underaged twins.

"And maybe then you could, um, drop us off at our friend's house?" added Joel, pointing at his friend Jake, who was still clutching his stomach, playing the sympathy card with the girls.

"Sure, we'd be happy to do that, wouldn't we, ladies?" Starr sighed. All too happy to do that, she thought. "C'mon, girls, let's pack it in for the night."

They loaded up the back of the van and piled in. With the boys, there were no spare seats, so Elvia, Lily, and Linda sat on the floor in the back.

"Mrs. Darkside?"

"Yes, Moira?"

"We're all very hungry, you know. I was wondering," said Moira, looking pensive, "if we were willing to take full responsibility for our actions, wouldn't we – I mean, you know, if we – you know – wouldn't we be 'using resources wisely' and 'making the world a better place'?"

"Moira, darling, you're starting to sound like a lawyer. Linda, sweetie? Close your eyes a moment, will you?"

"Oh, it's okay," said Linda cheerfully. "I've watched before."

Starr sighed and nodded. "Okay, then. Help yourself to some of the cookies in the back, if you like." Starr pulled over to the side of the road.

As Moira climbed astride Joel's lap, he thought he'd suddenly died and gone to heaven. He wasn't too far off; he had it half right. Elvia smacked her lips loudly as she finished him off.

Bella and Donna took Jake from in front and behind, sinking their teeth into carotid and jugular simultaneously. The thrill alone nearly caused his heart to burst before they drained it dry.

Little Lily sweetly laid her head on Ronnie's shoulder. He couldn't believe his luck. Just as he was about to try to cop a feel on the sleeping girl, she sank her fangs deep and began to suck the blood from his veins, giving him one last lesson in "be careful what you wish

for." Each girl took a turn, and felt pleasantly full for the first time in days.

By the time they were done, Linda had eaten five Raspberry Puff Pastry Crème cookies, six ChocoMints, three Shamrock Shorties, and ten Zoodles.

Starr slurped up leftovers as she hauled the boys out of the van and left them in an old cemetery under a pile of plastic flowers.

"Mrs. Darkside?"

"Yes, Elspeth?" Starr looked over her shoulder as she climbed back into the driver's seat.

"We tried so hard to do the right thing."

"I know, dear. Buying food at the Blood Bank is proving a bit harder than we'd thought, but—well, we need to eat. We'll just have to think of a different strategy. Something those obnoxiously cheerful girls from Troop #317 can't spoil for us. Now, wipe the blood off your chin and stop chewing on your lip."

"Sorry, Mrs. Darkside." Elspeth stopped for a moment, then resumed chewing. Her own blood dribbled from the corner of her mouth.

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"Omigod," exclaimed Caroline, with an exaggerated rolling of the eyes. "Those girls from Troop #66613 sleep all day!"

"What is up with that?" asked Jeni.

"Mrs. Sprinks says they're working on some science project involving nocturnal animals," said Lorelei.

"Eeeww, like what? Bats? Possums?" Tiffany made a face. Bunnies, kittens, ducks, and unicorns were about all the wildlife she could handle. Tiffany was a fluffy creature, herself, so she could relate to them more easily.

Lorelei shrugged and skipped around the camp, eager to be off on the nature hike they had planned for their first morning at Camp Starry Night.

While they waited for their leader, Buffy Sprinks, Jeni brewed a plot. She snapped her fingers and grinned. "I've got an idea!" she cried. She ran inside her cabin and came back holding a large can of cotton-candy scented, sparkly, pink shaving cream. She motioned to the others, who followed her on tiptoe into Troop #66613's cabin, quiet as field mice.

"Where are they, and what's with all the boxes?" asked Tiffany.

"Weird."

"Creepy." Lorelei tried to pry open one of the boxes, but the lid wouldn't budge.

"Must be part of their experiment," said Jeni. "Think they've got animals trapped in there?" she asked, knocking on the polished pine but getting no response, not even a muffled scuffling sound of a possum or a bat. Jeni shrugged. She shook up her can of shaving cream and started to spray one of the oblong boxes. She sprayed the other girls' clothes, which lay in open suitcases beside each box. She sprayed the windows with sparkly, pink happy faces, their sparkly, pink tongues lolling out.

"Psssst! She's coming!" Caroline hissed, and the little girls ran out the back door. They strolled around the side of the building as if they had come from the latrines, and surrounded Mrs. Sprinks with eager faces.

"Ready for our nature walk, girls?"

"Ready, Mrs. Sprinks!" Lorelei led the way, skipping ahead on the shadowy, wooded path behind the cabins. The girls listened attentively as Mrs. Sprinks identified for them the various wildflowers, herbs, and bushes that grew in the forest. As Buffy Sprinks bent over to point out a fine, upstanding Jack-in-the-Pulpit, a snake writhed in a frantic

S-curve across the footpath, right in front of Tiffany, who let out a bloodcurdling, ear-splitting scream.

The girls nearly jumped out of their skin. Caroline sneered and said, "What are you so worried about, Tiff? It's just one of the girls from Troop #66613. Must've gotten lost on her way to the latrine."

Jeni laughed, and the other girls joined in, some nervously, as they cast over-the-shoulder glances in the direction the snake had gone – straight towards the cabins.

A cloud passed between them and the bright yellow disc of the sun, and the temperature dropped a few degrees. There was a collective moan, echoed by the wind itself, as a few large water droplets plopped onto the girls' sweetly painted, upturned faces. Caroline's mascara began to run, and Lorelei laughed as it occurred to her that she was seeing a raccoon-girl of record-breaking proportions. Her laughter was cut short by a taunting, wicked little voice that seemed to move about from one side of the huddled group of scouts to the other:

The Adventure Scouts trooped through the woods,

As it rained, they all wished they had hoods.

It rained harder and harder!

If they'd only been smarter!

Be prepared, next time – bring the goods!

"What was that?" groaned Lorelei. "Tell me it wasn't supposed to be poetry."

"That'd be too horrible to contemplate," said Buffy, calmly peering through the raindrops, into the tangled thicket of bushes and trees and vines that surrounded them. It began to rain more heavily, and the girls jumped as lightning struck not far from where they stood. They turned to run back towards camp, but a large tree had fallen across the path and blocked their way.

"It was a man's voice," said Jeni. "What would a man be doing out here?"

"And what would a giggling gaggle of goose-girls be doing out here in the rain?" taunted the voice. "What, indeed?"

And out from behind a gnarled oak tree popped the ugliest little man any of the girls had ever seen. His filthy, shamrock-green coat was rain-soaked and hung from his body in tatters. His reddish-brown hair was matted and grew in irregular patches all over his head and his chin. The girls stared, breathless with fear.

"What are you staring at? Ain't you never seen a leprechaun before, lassies?" The little man spat at their feet with disgust. The rain abated slightly, but angry, purple clouds still loomed overhead.

"A leprechaun? You?" Caroline looked down her nose at the dwarflike creature and snorted. "I don't believe you!"

"Fine by me. I'm tired of being chased about the woods by grimy little children trying to get their grimy little paws on me. And you!" he said, looking at Buffy Sprinks. "You greedy grownups are every bit as despicable." The noxious creature sprayed the horrified girls with spittle as he spoke.

"I think he really is a leprechaun," whispered wide-eyed Tiffany.

"No way," hissed Jeni. "Where's his pot of gold? There's no rainbow for miles. This storm's not likely to end any time soon." But just as the words left her lips, the roiling dark clouds parted and a ray of sunshine burst down upon them. The leprechaun dashed down the path giggling like an escapee from a lunatic asylum. Caroline was fairly sure that's what he must've been, but Tiffany insisted on taking off after him.

"Oh, Tiffany, for heaven's sake!" Buffy Sprinks began to run after Tiffany, motioning to the girls to follow her quickly, so they wouldn't be separated in the woods.

The girls from Troop #66613 awoke to a full moon. They climbed from their comfy, satin-lined beds and dropped to the floor, quiet as mice. "Eeeeewwww!" cried Elvia. "Gross!"

"PINK?" shrieked Moira, revolted.

"Revenge," whispered Linda darkly. Her lovely eyes narrowed at the sight of the girls' black t-shirts and jeans coated with pink, sparkly foam, now dried to a flaky crust. Together, they brushed off the worst of the mess and got dressed.

The girls from Troop #317 were huddled around a the bright, dancing flames of a bonfire, toasting marshmallows and singing cheerful Adventure Scout camping songs. It made Bella and Donna want to retch. The remnants of sparkle dust clung to their clothes and twinkled merrily in the reflected firelight. The girls shuddered.

Mrs. Darkside put an arm around Elspeth and Rowan, who looked miserable and dejected. "It's okay, girls. A little fairy dust never hurt anyone but the fairies who flung it." Her eyes, like dying coals, met Buffy Sprinks's bright blue ones over the campfire. The women nodded gravely at one another.

"Where have you girls been?" called Buffy. "You missed the most interesting nature walk."

Caroline and Tiffany giggled. Their hands sparkled in the light of the flames. Lorelei and Jeni had their heads bent over a large cauldron. With their hands plunged deeply into the pot, they shuffled something metallic that sounded like coins. Their eyes were bright, even a little feverish. Starr Darkside raised an eyebrow.

"We're going on a night walk, ourselves. So many interesting creatures only come out at night. It will be very educational, I'm sure. Would you like to come with us?"

Rowan started to protest, wringing her doll with anxious little hands. Before she could snap its slender, wax neck, Mrs. Darkside laid a hand on her shoulder and said softly, "Shhhh."

"No, dears, you go on ahead," said Buffy. "My girls have been up since the crack of Dawn, and really ought to head to bed soon."

The girls of Troop #66613 headed off into the dark woods, glad to be away from the fluffy lightness of being in the company of Troop

#317. Night sounds welcomed them into the gloom. An owl hooted plaintively, and was answered by a distant, hollow, "To who? To who?"

Most of the girls had excellent night vision, but in deference to Linda, they carried a single flashlight. Its dim beam lit an eerie path. They had gone but half a mile, when one of the girls nearly tripped over a squishy lump in the road.

"Ooof!" grunted the lump.

"Yikes!" squealed Elvia. "What the hell?"

"Watch yer mouth," grumbled the lump. The thing shifted and grew bigger, until it stood nearly shoulder-high to Moira, the tallest. "Ooooh, me achin' head," the odd little man clutched his head in his hands and shook it side to side. "If it isn't another gaggle of girls. Not so gigglin' this time, though. More like...ghoulish." He gave the girls a toothy grin.

"Sir, can we be of any help to you?" asked Elspeth timidly. "Are you hurt?"

The little man gave Elspeth a queer look. "Hurt? Help me?" He sat down on the path again and tried to puzzle it out. "You want to help...me?"

"Yes, sir," chimed eight little girls who had solemnly vowed to be friendly and helpful, considerate and caring.

"All right, then! I see that ye mean what ye say, and are not like those other brats... But..."

"Other brats?"

"Oh, yes, earlier today I was caught out in a thunderstorm, a nasty, angry, muddy mess of a thunderstorm. I canna run so fast as I used to, ye know, and so they gave me a merry chase and tackled me at the foot of me rainbow just as if I was the running back for the Detroit Lions. They stole me pot o' gold and left me for dead, they did..."

"That is just awful! An Adventure Scout is supposed to be respectful, honest, and fair! Are you telling us those girls stole from you?"

"Aye, they did!" the leprechaun nodded and pouted and looked righteously indignant. "I'm gettin' too old fer this nonsense, y'know. That pot o' gold was t' be my retirement, it was. I had one last chance to do me duty and guard the fairies' gold, and those brats stole it! An' poof! There goes me retirement."

"May I—may I ask your name, sir?"

"Larry," said the dejected little man in the green suit. "Larry the freakin' leprechaun." He sighed.

Lily, who had been picking night-blooming creepers, handed a deadly bouquet to the leprechaun. "Nice to meet you, Larry. I'm Lily."

Larry was touched by the little girl's gesture. As each girl politely introduced herself, Larry began to feel a bit better, and a bit more vindictive. It was clear to him that these girls bore no great love for the girls of Troop #317, and he schemed to enlist their aid.

They, in turn, schemed to enlist his. And soon a bargain was struck.

Larry crept into the camp where the angelic little girls of Troop #317 slept peacefully, dreaming of their ill-gotten gold. After all, what was the fate of one pathetic leprechaun, obviously well past his prime, to them? He snarled in the moonlight, revealing viciously crooked and wickedly sharp little teeth that were almost as green as his ragged suit.

Larry found Troop #317's mascot, Eunice the Unicorn, tethered to a post at the side of the cabin. Eunice had been combed until she shone. Her mane and tail had been liberally dusted with iridescent white fairy dust, then plaited neatly and tied up with emerald silk ribbons in bows. Her hooves had been lacquered Kelly green and adorned with little gold shamrock decals. Poor Eunice! She was a proud unicorn, and it was humiliating to be treated as a pet, like an ordinary cat or dog, and paraded about dressed in such a way. She

secretly longed to gore someone with her wickedly-sharp and twisted horn. She stomped and snorted as the funny little man untied her. She pounded and pawed at the ground, until she realized that he meant her no harm, and intended only to hose her off and grant her freedom, in exchange for a very small favor...

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"Did you hear that?" whispered Caroline loudly.

"Sounded like Eunice!" cried Jeni and Lorelei.

Buffy and the girls shot out of bed and dashed out into the night wearing only their flowered nightdresses and bunny slippers. "She's gone!" they gasped in unison. "Eunice!" The little girls were in a panic. They heard a distant whinny. Heartened by the sound, but knowing that it could be an ordinary horse, the girls headed in that direction. Finally, they came to a dilapidated old barn. There in the doorway, they could the brilliant white unicorn. She snorted, tossed her head, and reared up on her hind hooves. "Eunice," sighed the little girls. They were relieved and overjoyed to have found her.

But as they approached, Eunice shied away, moving deeper and deeper into the old barn.

"Eunice," coaxed Lorelei, the only one of the Troop bright enough or hungry enough to have tucked an apple into her pocket before bed. "I have a treat for you..."

There was something strange about the unicorn. Buffy noticed it immediately – her mane and tail were waving wildly and freely with each toss of her magnificent head. Eunice no longer sparkled in the moonlight; she glowed. A strange sense of terror tingled up Buffy's spine as she tried to call the girls back, but they had already followed the horny horse into the vast dark mouth of the old barn.

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Linda sat outside the barn with Larry, who pulled a meerschaum pipe from his pocket, stuffed it with fragrant tobacco, and drew

deeply the sweet, woody smoke. The fairies would never grant him his retirement, but Troop #66613 had offered to make him an honorary member. Immortality was within his grasp, should he choose it. He looked up at the thousands of stars above, and thought of the one Starr within. The sucking sounds, the crack of bone, the wet ripping sound of gristle being pulled back as shoulders were dislocated and necks cracked in two – these were music to the little green man's ears, and he considered it. He wondered what would become of Linda, the little girl who would never truly be one of them. Though Elvia, Moira, Lily, Bella and Donna, Rowan, Elspeth, and Starr held nothing but affection for Linda, the token human child in their midst, they were a little jealous from time to time – just a little green with envy, like Larry - because they all knew that to be somewhere in between the light and the dark was the most desirable place of all to be.

Keeping Up Appearances

"Child, you're looking rather peaked," said Thomas. "Why don't you come out into the gardens and cut some flowers for the table?"

Eliza smiled at her father. "That would brighten the room, Papa." She rose to her feet slowly, resting one hand on her belly and grimacing, as if in pain.

"What is it, Eliza? Are you ill?"

"No, no. Of course not." Eliza brushed her father's suggestion aside and resolved not to let him see that she was, indeed, unwell. She went into the mudroom and fetched a pair of scissors and a basket. As an afterthought, she grabbed her sunbonnet, placed it squarely on her head, and tied its great blue satin bow around her chin.

Her father let out a hearty laugh at the sight of her. "My little southern belle."

"Mama says I ought to wear it whenever I go out of doors. She says the sun's not good for my complexion."

Thomas peered at his daughter with undisguised curiosity. The girl had the flawless, milk-white, porcelain-smooth features of a European doll, with two rosy spots of color at each cheekbone. Her eyes were the clear, sparkling blue of Fletcher's Lake in summertime; her raven hair cascaded over her shoulders in thick, silken waves. Surely a little sun and fresh air would do her no harm!

"Well, neither is being shut up in this stuffy old house at the peak of springtime, m'dear! Let's go see if the pinks are in bloom." He offered his arm; Eliza took it as gracefully as if she were the Lady of the manor.

As a small child, Eliza had run wild, barefoot, and free from one end of the Ashton Estate to the other. As she grew older, her beauty began to blossom. Her mother, Jennabeth, had taken a sudden interest in her daughter's upbringing; she dismissed the nurse and abruptly

curtailed Eliza's freedom. Each morning, Jennabeth taught lessons in deportment, elocution, and needlepoint. Eliza despised needlepoint; it bored her almost to tears. She daydreamed as she worked, and while her mind was elsewhere, she was prone to dropping stitches and pricking blood from her fingertips.

Jennabeth had high hopes for her only daughter. In a few years, when the child had nearly come of age, she would make her debut in society. They would have to travel to New York, or perhaps Atlanta, but Jennabeth felt certain a suitable match could be arranged in short order. Her daughter would marry well, and assure her some measure of comfort in her old age. Thomas loved his gardens, but he had never tended their finances with the same care he lavished on his roses. They were comfortable, certainly, but not fantastically wealthy. Jennabeth had aspirations.

For Jennabeth's hopes and dreams to be realized, she knew that she must protect and nurture her daughter's one great asset – her beauty. She had the servants prepare milk baths for the girl, to keep her skin soft and smooth as it had been on the day that she let loose her first cry on the world. She, herself, saw to it that Eliza's hair received its hundred vigorous brushstrokes each night. It gleamed like the mane of the finest thoroughbred. And Jennabeth insisted upon a nightly dose of Dr. Cauthon's Complexion Wafers, just to be sure the sunlight didn't mar the pale translucence of her doll-like face.

Now, standing at the window, watching her husband and daughter frolic in the garden, Jennabeth seethed with anger. Oh, Eliza had worn her sunbonnet, but it had fallen back onto her shoulders and her dark hair flounced as the breeze ran its fingers through it. She reached carelessly into the rosebushes, where thorns left deep scratches in her flawless skin. The fools would ruin everything! All of Jennabeth's plans, all the work she had done to ensure Eliza's future, ruined. "Nooooo!" she cried. "How could you?" Reaching out, she grasped a delicate Chinese vase and threw it across the room. It hit the wall and crashed onto the floor, shattering into a million tiny slivers. Jennabeth turned on her heel and stormed down to meet them at the front door.

"Mama!" cried Eliza, breathless from running in the garden, chasing butterflies.

"Mrs. Ashton," murmured Thomas, formally and with his head slightly bowed in deference to his wife's severe expression.

"So. You want to run around outside like a little heathen, is that it?"

"Now, Mama, don't be so hard on the girl—"

"Thomas, shut up."

Eliza's eyes flashed at this sudden outburst of rudeness from her mother. She knew that things had been tense, and rather formal, between her parents for some time. But she had never heard a cross word, a raised voice, or an admonition from one to the other until now. "Mama, we were just getting flowers for the dining room!" Eliza held out the basket full of pinks and white roses. "See? Aren't they lovely?"

"Indeed." Jennabeth glared at Thomas, but held her tongue. "Put them up, Eliza, and then come have your bath."

"Yes, Mama."

⁂ ⁂ ⁂

Eliza peered into the looking glass and ran a hand along the side of her face, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. She was still flushed from her exertions, but she couldn't see why a little color in her cheeks was so undesirable. But Mama was angry. Eliza had never seen her fury so tightly wound up, so barely under her control. It was true that she had devoted herself to bettering Eliza, to "finding a suitable match" for her, as she put it. At fourteen, the child could only wonder what her mother meant by it. She picked up the little box of Dr. Cauthon's Complexion Wafers and, reasoning that if one was good, two must be better, tried to regain her mother's good graces.

⁂ ⁂ ⁂

"Take it!" her mother insisted, holding the wafer out to Eliza. "Goodness, but all that time in the sun's got you looking like a little brown Indian!" Complaisant as always, Eliza did as her mother told her. But already she was feeling the effects from the earlier dose, and had begun to suspect that two was not, in fact, better than one. Three must be horrible. And yet, she did as she was told. She took the slightly bitter wafer on her tongue, crushed it in her mouth, and swallowed.

"Now come down to dinner," said Jennabeth, lacing the girl's corset quite severely. "Wear the green gown, and try not to behave like a wayward child."

"Yes, Mama."

Eliza felt the room spin on its axis as she stepped into the gown her mother had laid out for her. The emerald satin was lovely, to be sure. Jennabeth had had it made especially for her in New York. A touch of ivory lace at the throat and at her elbows made her looks very grown up, she thought, as she checked her appearance in the mirror.

Eliza descended the stairs slowly, gracefully, as her mother had taught her. Dutifully, she joined her parents in the dining room. The food looked sumptuous, but Eliza had no appetite. She looked at her plate miserably, and felt as if she were growing smaller, more distant. Her parents' voices seemed to come from a long way off, another world, perhaps... And suddenly, the room seemed dreadfully hot; it seemed to shrink until it threatened to suffocate her. She wanted to rip off the confining satin, tear open the cruel corset... "Oh, God!" she cried, clutching at the tablecloth and pulling it towards her as she slipped from the high-backed chair.

A moment later, Eliza began to retch. Doubled over with intense pain, she could only gasp and heave and try to catch her breath. She began to...twitch. Great shudders coursed through her – if a shiver was, as they said, "someone walking over your grave," then a whole army was trampling over Eliza's.

"Eliza?" Her father's voice – so very far away, it seemed.

"Eliza, what in the name of—" Her mother's voice, tinged with irritation. She was not in Mama's good graces yet, she thought, and for this she felt a pang of sadness.

"Eliza!" Her father's arms encircled her waist, lifted her up, held her like a small child, or a doll.

"Papa," she sighed, smiling weakly up at the father who had always insisted on her having fun—damn the fancy dresses, the perfectly coiffed hair, the ladylike demeanor. He had taught her to pick wildflowers and catch lightning bugs and chase butterflies. "Dear Papa..."

Eliza convulsed, the violence of the nausea welling up inside her too much to bear. She felt as if her stomach were turning inside out, and retched until there was nothing left to bring up. A fine sheen of perspiration gave her face a saintly radiance, as if she had already crossed over to the realm of angels.

Her father wept, and hoped the angels enfolded his little one into their holy winged embrace.

❊ ❊ ❊

Jennabeth had gone quite mad with grief. It was as if her own future had been shattered, all her hopes and dreams lying still and cold and dead in that blasted coffin next to Eliza. "I've talked with the coffin seller," she had said. "I want our daughter to have the best, most beautiful casket they make." Thomas wondered what difference that could make, now. Surely a coffin was no dowry; surely the quest for beauty ended here. But no. Jennabeth had heard of a newfangled, "hermetically-sealed" casket, one that was guaranteed to preserve the appearance of the loved one for all eternity. It was lined with snow white, cushioned silk and came with a pretty little lace-ruffled pillow on which to fan out Eliza's dark, wavy hair. The thought of it made Thomas want to retch, but he said nothing. He hadn't the heart to exchange hateful words with the woman he had ceased to think of as

"wife" at the moment when his beloved daughter closed her eyes for the last time.

❊ ❊ ❊

The midday heat was sweltering. Thomas wiped sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, and pried open the mausoleum door. It was a monstrosity of white marble, sculpted cherubs, and stained glass, topped off with a golden dome. What a pompous show of grief, thought Thomas, and as cold as the woman who designed it. He had opened his mouth only once to argue against it, and was met with such wailing, shrieking, and gnashing of teeth that he threw up his hands in defeat and left Jennabeth to consult with the monument builders. He would pay the bills, but refused to have any part in it beyond that. He had acquiesced only to shut the woman up.

But still, Thomas was drawn to this place of death. He imagined that his daughter slept here, quite peacefully, and might awaken at the sound of the door being pulled back. No, that wasn't quite right. But he was beginning to prefer the company of the dead to the company of the living, and though his wife had insisted on building this grotesque memorial to Eliza, he found that he could come here to deal with his grief in private. Jennabeth never set foot in the place; it gave her the vapors to think of it.

Even inside the marble edifice, Thomas could not escape the heat. He sat on the floor of the mausoleum, staring disconsolately at the niche in the crypt where his only child was interred. He put his face in his hands and wept. There was no one but Eliza to know, and he felt sure that she would understand.

The stillness, which until this point had been broken only by the sound of Thomas's sobbing, was disturbed by a strange groaning sound, a muffled pop...

Suddenly, the stone wall of the crypt blew open with a massive explosion! The stone cracked, shattered, blew out in all directions. Thomas barely had time to react. He turned his face to the opposite wall, and prayed. He had never known such terror in all his life. He

was pummeled with chunks of rock; his back and arms were slashed as sharp bits hurtled towards him with the force of a gunshot. Something wet oozed down the back of his neck. A fine powder of white marble, fine as ash, rained down on him.

Thomas reached up to touch his head, his back, his arms. Miraculously, he had survived. But what in the name of God...

What in the name of God was that smell? Thomas tried to clear his befuddled mind. His injuries were numerous; he was covered in blood, and something else... a viscous, foul-smelling substance that ran in greenish black rivulets across the smooth, dust and rock-covered floor. He reached out to pick up a piece of the shattered marble and looked at it. Curiously shaped...

Oh, Mother of God. It was bone.

⁂ ⁂ ⁂

Jennabeth listened as her husband babbled an incoherent rendition of the afternoon's horror. She turned away, unwilling to hear or imagine what he had seen, what –precious filth he had so vigorously scrubbed from his body out in the mud room, letting the water run out the door, back into the earth, where it belonged. She refused to accept it.

The workmen came the next day to clean up the worst of the devastation. "It's these newfangled coffins, Mr. Ashton," said one, shaking his head sadly. "Damned things are supposed to preserve the deceased – God rest their souls – but just let it get hot enough, and..."

"I think I understand," said Thomas, silencing the man with a gesture of dismissal. "I think I understand...all too well."

Thomas refused to speak to Jennabeth, and she was quite content not to speak to him. For nearly two years, they lived like ghosts in the great tomb of a house. The fancy mausoleum fell into a state of disrepair, though none could see the damage caused by the explosion. It stood empty, lifeless as the tomb it was.

It might have been consumption. It might have been a great many things, but Thomas was past caring. The night Jennabeth passed away, he felt only a sense of lightening, as if God had lifted a great slab of a stone from around his neck, and set him free.

The next morning, he called the coffin maker. "I want only the best for my wife," he said, letting the bitterness of the word wife roll on his tongue for a moment before he spat it out. "One of those newfangled – what do they call them? Yes, yes – one of those hermetically-sealed numbers. Appearances were always so important to Jennabeth. I want to ensure that her – beauty – lasts eternally."

⁂ ⁂ ⁂

By summer, Thomas Ashton had sold the old estate and moved north. He had never learned to tolerate the memory of hot summer days under a sweltering sun.